KOYOMIMONOGATARI

CALENDAR TALE PART 01

NISIOISIN

TRANSLATED BY
DANIEL JOSEPH

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VERTICAL.

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Calendar Tale

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Art by VOFAN

Translated by Daniel Joseph

VERTICAL.

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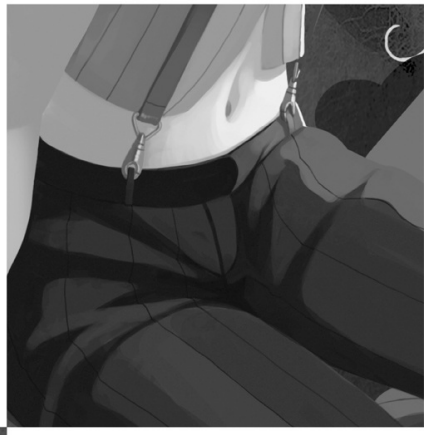

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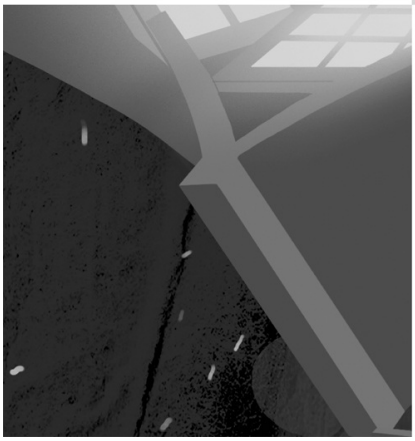

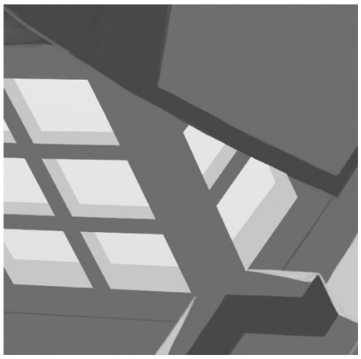

CHP ONE

KOYOMI
STONE

CHP TWO

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FLOWER

CHP THREE

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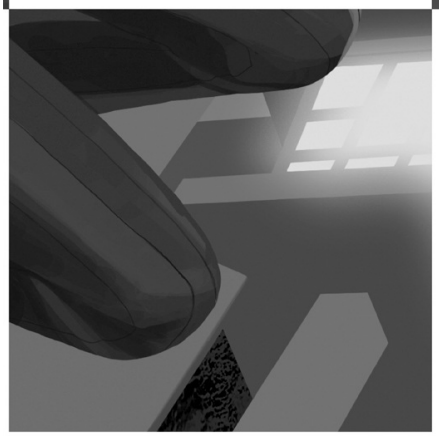

CHP FOUR

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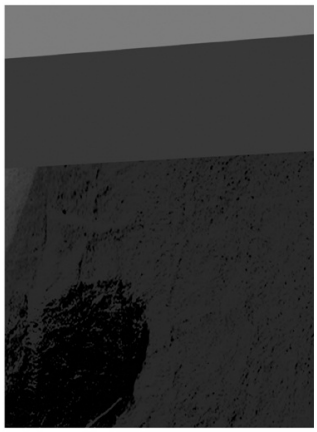
WATER



CHP FIVE

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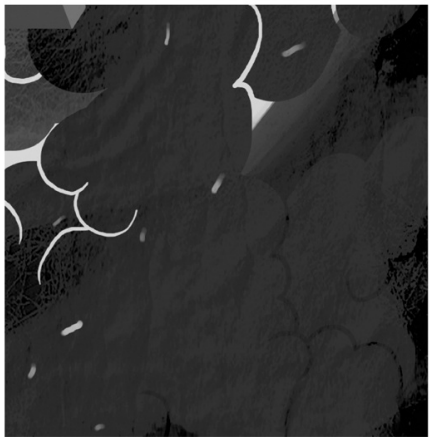
WIND



CHP SIX

KOYOMI
TREE

CHAPTER ONE
KOYOMI STONE

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4
April

001

You want to know how I was feeling about going to school back around the beginning of April, when I had just met Tsubasa Hanekawa, and we'd just been put in the same class? You want to know what I was feeling on the way to school, as I trod that path? Well, I wasn't feeling much of anything at all.

My feelings as I traveled that road.

Even the road itself, didn't seem concrete to me.

I couldn't find any concrete reason for going to school.

Get woken up by my little sisters, change into my school uniform, get on my bike, head to the out-of-my-league private prep school Naoetsu High—I'd been busy repeating that routine, that homework-like routine of busy work, for two years already, but I'd never once considered what that repetition meant, or didn't mean.

Or no, maybe I should say that I'd given up considering the question ages ago, because no matter how hard I thought about it, I was never going to find an answer.

But the same could be said of almost all the young men and women who have the honor of calling themselves high school students in this great nation of Japan, or I expect it could, so I wasn't actually the least bit special in that regard—the truth of the matter is that virtually all the young men and women who, despite having completed their compulsory education, continue to live the life of the high school student, who at least superficially "attend school of their own volition," can't even discern an abstract meaning in doing so, let alone a

concrete one.

So it’s perfectly understandable that the extremely small number of well-grounded students who do find a sense of fulfillment in their schooling would be left scratching their heads, dumbfounded by the fact that an outsider like me, who must seem to them like some kind of monstrous apparition, would still come to school every day.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying I’m dissatisfied.

When these sorts of thoughts pop into my head I do find it the tiniest bit disquieting, but no, I’m not dissatisfied—it’s not like there’s anything else I’d rather be doing, or even anything else I could be doing.

Me, I’m nothing—but precisely because I’m nothing.

The fact that I’m a high school student.

High school itself.

Provides me with the assurance that I’m me.

Especially, particularly, because over the spring break before the first term of my senior year—I went through hell.

I saw into the depths of a hell that could very well have made me forget I was a mere high school student, and put an end to my school career altogether.

It was a spring break that made me unpleasantly aware of the verity, the venerability, of banal aphorisms like *ordinary is happy* and *nothing beats an uneventful life*—and that assurance should’ve been a real lifesaver for me. Nevertheless, as I rode along the road that April, I thought about how strange it was that I still blithely went to school as if bound by some hard-and-fast rule, as if it was normal—and that after class, I went home again the same way.

It’s funny.

Having been through that kind of hell, you'd think I'd feel truly grateful for an ordinary life, that I would live each day as if it were my last—but the me that had returned from hell was still just regular old me. They say *danger past and god forgotten,* but I guess you forget hell, too, once it's past.

I asked Hanekawa about it once.

Asked her if the fact that I couldn't bring myself to feel grateful for the grace of everyday life meant that I was made of stone—and this is what she said.

What she told me, her face lit up by a wonderfully reassuring smile that, as always, made me wonder if she really did know everything.

"Of course you can't, Araragi. Because everyday life is something we take for granted. How can you take to heart something you take for granted? There's a road, and you walk down it, that's all. Take it from me."

“What? A rock?”

“Yup. A rock,” she said.

“Do you mean…the kind you find by the side of the road? Or more like a precious stone?”

“Come on, I obviously don’t mean a precious stone.”

Sure, maybe it was obvious to her, but I had yet to learn what it was all about, so how was I supposed to know what was obvious and what wasn’t?

The only thing that was obvious to me was that I had no idea what was going on.

But I wasn’t about to let it stay that way—I have a low tolerance for confusion. I decided to try and piece together what was going on, piece by piece, step by step, from the beginning. Starting at the beginning is the basic principle of organization.

It was the eleventh of April, after school let out—no one else was in the classroom, and Hanekawa and I were having a meeting about the class get-together planned for the following week. The reason we were the ones holding it was that she was the class president, and I the vice president; you might expect the leader of each clique or their representatives to show their faces, but like clockwork, they all seemed to have found some other important business from which they simply couldn’t tear themselves away.

Well, it may not have been an out-and-out lie that they had other things to do, but there was no question that the poor turnout was exacerbated by their faith

in the fact that “everything will basically turn out fine if we just leave it all up to Hanekawa,” which made her brilliance seem like something of a sin. And a grave sin at that.

Her brilliance, unhindered even by a burden as great as myself, unconsciously spoiled everyone around her—though I wasn’t exactly upset about having a chance to be alone with Hanekawa.

Not that I had some kind of ulterior motive, it’s just that since Naoetsu High is a prep school, pretty much all the third-years were studying for their college entrance exams; everyone was on edge. The mood was extremely volatile, like, *Is this any time to be throwing a party?* So it was a particularly uncomfortable atmosphere for a washout like myself.

In other words, it’s less that I was happy to be alone with her and more that I was happy not to be around all those other anxious students—needless to say, since Hanekawa could’ve aced the entrance exam for any institution of higher learning anywhere in the world even if it were held the following day, she didn’t share our classmates’ bristling anxiety.

And also needless to say, given my total lack of inclination to prepare for exams, not to mention the fact that I wasn’t even sure I was going to graduate, neither did I. So in that sense, you could say that the two people participating in that meeting were the two best candidates for the honor.

Given my general lack of enthusiasm for such things, though, if I’d had anything else important to do, I might very well have gone home too. Unfortunately, however, I was free. Terminally free. And sitting across from Hanekawa seemed slightly more likely to prolong my life than going home to fight with my sisters.

Anyway, during that meeting.

Or once it was basically wrapped up, really, while we were chatting about one thing and another, Hanekawa brought it up.

“A rock.”

“…Okay, a rock. What about it?”

A rock.

Or was she saying “Iraq”?

Was she implying that I didn’t know enough about international relations or something? We hadn’t really been talking about anything that would flow naturally into a critique of my knowledge base. Our meeting had been perfectly genial up to that point.

“A rock, or…yeah,” Hanekawa said.

It was rare, odd, for her to be so vague—or rather, it seemed as if she couldn’t decide how to describe *it.*

She was unsure.

Not—unsure of her judgment.

We weren’t yet at the stage to define *it*, or able to refer to *it*, so she just wasn’t making a decision.

Which is why she vaguely said—a rock.

That was how it seemed to me, anyway.

“I guess if I had to call it something—then a stone statue.”

“A stone statue?”

“Though it isn’t really a statue.”

“…”

“That’s why I said *if I had to*—lemme think.”

Heheh, giggled Hanekawa.

It was really cute, but in terms of a command, it was a laugh laughed to misdirect. I would've been perfectly willing to go along with her misdirection, but my interest in this "rock (or stone statue)" won out.

"C'mon, Hanekawa. What's the deal?"

"Oh, forget about it. I shouldn't ask other people about something I don't understand myself."

"Wise words. A little too wise."

That's exactly what you should ask other people about, that's the whole point.

Doesn't she know the saying *To ask is a moment's shame, not to ask, a lifetime's*? Okay, I doubt I know any sayings Hanekawa doesn't.

"But, well, I was thinking—wasn't collecting this kind of story Mister Oshino's line of work?"

"This kind of story?"

"Urban legends. The word on the street. Secondhand gossip," Hanekawa said, counting on her fingers. "In which case, I thought he might also be interested in the Seven Wonders of the School."

"Seven Wonders? Huh?"

"No, no, there aren't really seven wonders, of course. But listen, isn't a school like a treasury of ghost stories? It was built over a cemetery, or it was hit with an air raid during the war, that kind of—"

"Wait, does Naoetsu High have that much history?"

"No, but…"

But what?

I mean, I don’t know the pedigree of our school either—and upon reflection, it might be risky not to know the origins of your own school. Going every day to a place you don’t really understand without really understanding your feelings about going there?

As if it were the most natural thing in the world?

That’s—a little bit too little understanding.

“Phew, seems like the disgrace I bring to this school might be wonder number one…”

“Um, that doesn’t sound cool at all,” Hanekawa retorted.

And no, it didn’t make me happy that she did.

Maybe she hadn’t gotten the joke—but her serious bent didn’t mean that she didn’t have a sense of humor, in which case I guess it just wasn’t funny. Forget about not being happy, it was kind of a shock.

Besides, would any guy on earth be happy to hear a girl say he wasn’t cool?

“I wouldn’t go so far as to call it disgrace, and anyway, putting it at number one seems weird.”

Drop it already.

She was being more like a guidance counselor than a straight man.

Her position that everything in need of correction should be thoroughly corrected was, indeed, laudable, but I didn’t particularly welcome being on the receiving end of it.

Didn’t particularly welcome, or particularly unwelcomed, or just felt restless.

You might even say hopeless.

“The buildings themselves seem relatively new, so I don’t think the school’s

been around since before the war or anything."

Was there a pamphlet or something that touted the year the school was founded? Seems like there would be, but if I ever saw one I don't remember… I would've just ignored a number like that anyway.

"There was another educational institution here before," Hanekawa enlightened me, "but it's been Naoetsu High School for eighteen years. It turns eighteen this year. About the same age as us."

"Wow, I would've expected it to be…"

Younger, I was going to say, but if it was the same age as me and Hanekawa, I guess it wasn't all that old.

But that's Hanekawa for you.

Unlike me, she had a firm handle on the history, the origins, of her school—I bet when she was in her last year of middle school and studying for the entrance exams, she looked into it because she wanted to know what kind of high school she'd be attending.

Then again, maybe she'd found out about it long before that, just a piece of common knowledge she'd picked up along the way—in either case, no one likes that kind of middle schooler.

"Hmm? What? Expected it to be…"

"Nothing. It's just such a half-assed number."

"Hahaha. Maybe. But you're right, I guess this school doesn't have quite enough history for there to be seven wonders—there don't seem to be any stories about students who died here or anything."

"Don't seem to be…"

That's.

Well, I wondered—something like a death. Not the kind of info you'd look for while you were studying for the entrance exam, let alone just a piece of common knowledge.

It wasn't anything you'd find out unless you really dug deep into the eighteen years of the school's history—

"In other words, how can I put this? Naoetsu High—doesn't have anything like a real ghost story."

"Hmm…yeah, I suppose I've never really heard one."

Then again, I was always decisively disconnected from the student circles in which such rumors circulated.

Partially because I was never interested in knowing any of the hot gossip about who was dating who, or who was getting into fights with who.

It wasn't my intention to be the standard bearer for some revolution against our information overload society, but it's true that I never wanted to play the town gossip or the town crier. That much is certainly true. I've wanted to live in isolation from anything that could be called news.

At the same time, I idolize Hanekawa for "knowing everything," so my attitude towards life is vaguely, you know, vague.

"Um, what were we talking about? Sorry, Hanekawa. My mind's been wandering a little too far, and I lost the thread…"

"Huh? C'mon, Araragi, I told you. It's this stone—"

"This stone that I have no clue about. Please, just start at the beginning."

"Aren't I?" asked Hanekawa, flabbergasted.

Well, sure, I bet she thought so—she thought she was explaining it clearly, from the beginning, and in fact it might've been perfectly clear to a good

listener.

Unfortunately, I was the listener, and it was all Greek to me. You've got to adjust your conversation to the level of your interlocutor. As in crank it all the way down for me.

At the bare minimum, I wanted her to clarify whether we were talking about a stone or a ghost story.

"Mmm. Um, I guess it's…" Hanekawa responded in mild consternation in response to my demand, "a ghost story about a stone, yeah."

"?"

A ghost story about Estonia?

It wasn’t a ghost story about Estonia. Or Iraq, for that matter.

If it were, then instead of being roundabout or giving me the runaround, she’d have gotten to the point right away.

A ghost story about a stone.

Yes.

But telling me it was a ghost story about a stone, being told that it was a ghost story about a stone, didn’t advance the conversation—I remained, as ever, baffled.

However.

“Oh—”

After we had finished locking up the room and I had trailed Hanekawa out into the quad, however, we made some progress.

I say progress, but things only progressed in my own head—nothing actually moved.

The situation itself stood immobile, like a rock.

Since Hanekawa hadn’t made her intentions clear to me, as I trailed after her I had to wonder if she was taking me to the garbage area on the other side of the quad, but our destination was in fact a flowerbed.

No.

A stone—in a flowerbed.

And that stone, too.

Stood immobile, like a rock.

“─I’m starting to get the picture. But…it’s not really a ‘rock’ *or* a ‘stone statue,’ is it? I mean…”

I saw why her description had been so ambiguous─in the quad’s flowerbed, maintained by god knows who, a flowerbed that mystified me, was the thing.

A rock.

A stone statue, if she had to call it something─but only because I’d pressed her, because she had to call it something, and it didn’t resemble a “statue” at all.

It just sat there.

It was in and of itself nothing but a rock, but whether you had to or were pressed to, calling it a “stone statue” was not entirely without basis.

Because it was ensconced in a small shrine─ensconced it was, surrounded by dutiful offerings to boot.

“…”

No, “dutiful” might be a bit of an exaggeration. The arrangement of the offerings and the shrine’s construction were both anything but─a better word might be haphazard, or even crude. It didn’t seem like any sort of proper procedure had been followed, or rather, the whole thing seemed like some kid’s art project, like the product of playing house.

“One kick is all it’d take to smash this shrine to pieces…”

“Where do you even get ideas like that, Araragi? Kicking a shrine…”

You’d be punished, Hanekawa warned.

Well, she was right─since spring break, my ideas were tinged with a touch more violence than before.

And, possible divine retribution aside, the shrine just looked to be some wooden boards held together with a few nails, so one kick probably would leave

it in pieces, but the rock enshrined in it was another story.

A story where I'd probably break my foot.

It definitely wasn't big enough to be called a boulder, but nor was it small enough that you could just kick it out of the way.

I don't walk around with a tape measure in my pocket so I couldn't say precisely, but I'd estimate it was about the size of a rugby ball.

An uneven rugby ball—and a somewhat dirty one at that. Judging from its size, I gauged that it would be too heavy for Hanekawa, as a girl, to lift—but I didn't think that I, as a boy, could lift it either, so best not to rush into anything.

I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of Hanekawa.

A vain high school boy, that's me.

"Hanekawa. Is that the rock you were talking about?"

"Yup. That's it."

"Umm…"

With that confirmation, the conversation came to a grinding halt. But then, what was the appropriate question to ask to keep things going?

"…Were you the one who left these offerings here?"

"As if. I never bring sweets to school."

"Thought not…"

Our conversation had gotten derailed.

We seemed to be in sync but weren't.

But, well, whether she'd actually bring such things to school or not, the cheap sweets on the wooden altar, which was rustic, or obviously handmade like the shrine itself, hardly reflected her sensibilities.

I imagine she eats slightly classier snacks—and since she goes about life

with a drive that must burn through a lot of blood sugar, I doubt she dislikes sweets altogether.

“At first, actually—well, you know how Mister Oshino really looked out for us over spring break? I was wondering if there was some way to repay him—”

“Repay him…”

Wait.

It was just me, not “us” that Oshino looked out for over spring break, plus he demanded a fee (five million yen total). It didn’t add up for her to worry about “some way to repay him,” but she was a girl who didn’t add up when it came to stuff like that.

When you get right down to it, I ought to be thinking about repaying Hanekawa herself—and I definitely had been, which is why I’d agreed to take on the ill-fitting mantle of class vice president…and meekly followed her to the quad at this particular moment. That said, was there anything someone like me could do that could benefit her in the first place?

The thought left me feeling hollow.

Unaware, however, that I was thinking such thoughts—or well aware of it, for all I know—Hanekawa continued her explanation.

“—And Mister Oshino collects tales of aberrations, right? That’s his real occupation or…his job, right?”

“His job? Does that guy even work? Now that you mention it, I do remember him saying something about collecting tales of aberrations, but… wouldn’t that be more of a hobby?”

I doubted he had a goal in mind like putting together a book of them or giving a presentation at an academic conference. The guy just lived one day to

the next, he didn't even have a permanent address…

"Collecting tales of aberrations can't possibly be lucrative. He's not exactly stimulating the economy."

"Working isn't about money, Araragi."

"…"

Heavy stuff.

What kind of high schooler was she? At the same time, maybe only a high schooler could go and say that. But this was Hanekawa, and I suspected she'd go on saying it even after joining the workforce.

"Getting back on topic. Hop! The point is, if there were anything like seven wonders, or a 'school ghost story' at Naoetsu High, we could tell Mister Oshino about it. As a thank you."

"Would it serve…as a thank you? I'm not trying to throw cold water on the thought itself…but the aberrations Oshino collects, aren't they more like the real deal? Vampires, for instance…"

"A 'school ghost story' can be the real deal. And in terms of name recognition, 'school ghost stories' are among the elite of the aberration world. There may not be all that many people who're familiar with the Cackling Woman, but everyone knows Toilet Hanako, don't they?"

"Well, sure, if getting talked about is the barometer of aberration-hood, then name recognition would be important…" It's a cultural paradox, isn't it? Becoming too well-known can make something seem cheap or vulgar. It's a far cry from so-called sophistication, anyway. "It's by achieving widespread popular recognition that they become urban legends and secondhand gossip… Maybe it's just a matter of degree? Like, you know it when you see it…or there's no point

in trading rumors once everyone knows about something?”

“But I don’t think Mister Oshino cares about sophistication. Rumors are a kind of popular culture, after all.”

“Hmmm. Maybe so, but I wonder. I know it’s the thought that counts, but wouldn’t Oshino just snort at a ‘school ghost story’?”

“Mister Oshino isn’t that kind of person.”

“…”

To me he was precisely *that kind of person,* but apparently she felt differently.

“No, that’s not what I mean. Listen, Hanekawa, what I’m trying to say is that I’m not sure Oshino is looking for something so well-known, with as much name recognition as a ‘school ghost story’… If it’s such common knowledge, maybe he already knows about it?”

“I wonder. He might, of course, but every school has its own variations on a ‘school ghost story’—plus, once you’re an adult, it’s harder to waltz into a school. As far as tales of aberrations go, a school ghost story might be a difficult type for Mister Oshino to get his hands on.”

“Difficult…”

Ah.

Sure—as a student I take going to school for granted, so it took me a minute to see what she meant. But yeah, a school might be a closed space, the hardest place there is to get into if you’re a stranger, and moreover, an adult.

Particularly an adult like Oshino… Lacking anything resembling a steady job or a fixed abode, a guy like him might get nabbed the second he set foot on school grounds.

So if he wanted to take stock of any tales floating around the school, he'd have to interview the students individually, which would seem just as shady.

Since he wasn't with some TV show, even if he made a formal request he'd probably just get the door slammed in his face…

"I'm back on board. So you decided to investigate a 'school ghost story' with an eye to teaching him about it."

"That sounds so presumptuous—I would gift it to him. Maybe you're right, Araragi, maybe he wouldn't need it. Still, don't we want to do everything we can?"

"…No, I'm not that proactive about life."

Forget about doing everything you can, the guiding principle of my life is to do as little as possible.

Be that as it may, sighed Hanekawa. "It's like I said. I looked into it, but Naoetsu High doesn't have the history, and nothing like a ghost story has coalesced yet. 'Well, a swing and a miss,' I thought."

She sounded perfectly natural slipping the words "a swing and a miss" into conversation.

Tsubasa "Want to Do Everything We Can" Hanekawa must have swung and missed more times in her life than I could guess—but that hadn't broken her spirit, and she kept on "swinging and missing," as well as hitting the odd "home run," which I thought made her a real iconoclast.

Oshino had put it so well—what was it he'd said?

"But there was one thing that bothered me. Bothered me—or somehow, that I wanted to bother about."

"…You mean, this rock? Or stone statue, or whatever?" I asked, glancing at

the thing again.

It still looked like an ordinary rock—and yet, with the little shrine over it and the offerings surrounding it, the stone did seem like it might be “graced” with wondrous spiritual power.

Like a stone statue carved into that particular shape.

Ah, and speaking of—wondrous spiritual power (I’m not at all knowledgeable about this stuff so maybe I’m speaking out of turn here), aren’t there stories about stones that turn into protective amulets for their owners, “power stones” or something?

Though talking about “power stones” and “power spots” takes things in a bit of a different direction from tales of aberrations.

“Mm-hmm, yup. That’s what I mean.”

“So, while you were looking into all sorts of stuff, you came upon a mysterious rock way out in this quad’s flowerbed—but you can’t for the life of you figure out what’s up with it, something like that?”

I tried to get everything I’d learned thus far straight in my mind. Organization isn’t exactly my forte, but I don’t do well with a chaotic mess, so I have a bad habit of wanting to sum everything up as simply as possible as soon as possible. Though I’m well aware that it’s not the best way to arrive at the truth.

Hanekawa’s ability to process information, on the other hand, was on a different order of magnitude—or was measured with entirely different units, so apparently she could cope with this level of chaos as if it were “perfectly well-ordered.”

“That’s not it,” she unceremoniously, but gently, deflected my summary.

I had to wonder if her room was actually a total disaster. Well, not just hers, geniuses' rooms are always messy in the collective imagination.

A biased assumption, either way…

"In fact, I already knew this rock was here."

"You really do know everything."

"I don't know everything, I just know what I know. But," she added, "it didn't use to be like this."

"What didn't?"

"When I was a first-year—right after I started here, in other words? I did a general survey of the school."

"Why the hell would you…"

"Well, I wanted to see where I'd be spending the next three years of my life, I guess? Out of curiosity?"

"Curiosity…"

You're the curiosity here.

A model student's behavior was rife with mysteries. Her prodigious eccentricity went far beyond thoroughly researching Naoetsu High before taking its exam—which, admittedly, was just a figment of my imagination.

This was no time to be nattering on about such things, though.

"So two years ago, when you surveyed…or explored the school, this flowerbed didn't have any rock?"

"I never said that. Listen, okay? I'm saying it was here. I almost tripped over it, so I remember it clearly."

"Tripped? Seriously? You trip over things too?"

"What do you take me for, Araragi…"

Hanekawa looked fed up—no attempt to hide it.

The fact is that she hated being treated like a model student, or a superwoman.

“Yes, even I almost trip over things sometimes.”

“I’m…surprised to hear that.”

True, she’d tripped over a rock named Araragi and stumbled into something horrible over spring break, so maybe she wasn’t so perfect after all.

Let us note, however, that she said *almost tripped*, meaning she didn’t actually.

“But if it was here, what’s the problem?”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you: it didn’t use to be like this. The rock was here—but the shrine wasn’t.”

“?”

“Nor the offerings, nor the altar they’re sitting on.”

In other words, someone, continued Hanekawa.

“Someone, in the past two years, dolled up this rock like an icon—enshrining it.”

“…”

004

That night.

I headed to a certain abandoned building.

The ruins of a cram school that had gone out of business a few years back—it had taken up the entire building so it must've been a sizable enough cram school, but unable to stand up to the furious onslaught of a major exam prep-chain that had moved in over by the station, it was forced to retreat, or to abscond under cover of darkness—you hear all kinds of stories, but who knows what really happened.

Well.

Hmmm.

In that sense, I was heading from a high school whose origins I didn't really have a handle on to an abandoned building whose origins I didn't really have a handle on. Even I'm a little shocked that I could tread such a vague path without any sense of danger whatsoever.

But, not being Tsubasa Hanekawa, I didn't want to know about any of it badly enough to do my homework.

"Hey, Araragi—I've been waiting for you."

Oshino.

Mèmè Oshino, Expert, greeted me with the same mock-innocent line as always—when I arrived at a certain classroom on the fourth floor.

There was a little blond girl in the corner, but I'll omit a description of her.

I informed Oshino of the situation.

I may have added a few dramatic flourishes.

“Hm. A stone, huh?” said Oshino—an older guy in a Hawaiian shirt. “Stones often become objects of worship, don’t they—the power stones you mentioned are somewhat different, but you can lump them in.”

“Huh…like precious stones taking on magical properties?”

“Maybe, though these days—in modern society, it tends to be their value and not their appearance that fascinates people—”

Oshino chuckled softly.

He always came off as totally flippant, which is honestly not a type I do well with.

But Mèmè Oshino wasn’t just a flippant old fart—he was an old fart who had saved my life, my dignity, and my humanity.

Flippant though he most definitely was.

“You said it was about the size of a rugby ball, right, Araragi? So, which way was this rugby ball enshrined?”

“Which way?”

“Vertically? Horizontally? You said it was like a rugby ball, so I’m assuming it has a width and a height.”

“Oh…”

A pretty detailed question, I thought, but on the flipside, I’d come in Hanekawa’s stead to give a detailed explanation, so it was really an oversight on my part.

Maybe it would’ve been best if Hanekawa herself had come, but since it wasn’t a crisis or an emergency, my conscience had prevailed against the idea of marching a youthful maiden around town in the middle of the night.

“It’s kind of like a Jizo statue…and when you include the shrine, maybe it actually is patterned after one… Let’s see. Was Jizo a Buddhist deity?”

“This Araragi kid really knows his stuff.”

“You don’t have to say it like that.”

Not so naturally, anyway.

Though it was just a random fact I happened to have picked up, and the first and last I could muster on the subject.

I wasn’t even sure what Jizo was the Buddhist deity *of*.

“Lemme see…the patron saint of travelers? No, wait, isn’t there something about the Six Jizos? Hm, but Bamboo-Hat Jizo…”

The more I spoke, the more I seemed to be giving myself away.

“Ha hah. Well, in Japan, Jizo certainly has come to be conflated with the roadside gods that watch over travelers—though it’d be odd for it to be in a flowerbed.”

For once, Oshino almost seemed to be giving me the benefit of the doubt and didn’t make fun of me as I flailed helplessly.

“A stone statue,” he continued. “Since you described it as a stone statue, I’m assuming it’s got that sort of a shape? Meaning it’s not just round, but carved into the shape of a person—”

“I dunno… Honestly, Hanekawa had already given me that impression, so I guess I sort of saw it that way… But if I’d just happened to see it as I passed by the flowerbed, without any preconceptions—I probably would’ve thought it was just some nondescript rock.”

“A-ha.”

“Or…” I shook my head at Oshino’s smirking nod. “Maybe not—even if I

hadn’t been told about it, just passing by and seeing it ensconced in that wooden shrine, with that altar and everything, I might’ve thought it was carved like a statue—”

“The simulacrum phenomenon.”

“Huh?”

“When people see something that resembles a face, they find a face in it—or a human form in a stain or dirt on the wall. As the old saying goes, the truth behind the ghost is withered grass.”

“The truth behind the ghost—so I guess aberrations, and tales of aberrations, have something to do with this simu-whatever too?”

“No, that’s a separate issue entirely. Not to mention, Araragi, even if the stone took the form of a statue, that doesn’t mean someone carved it. It could’ve been naturally worn down by the elements until it ended up looking that way.”

“The elements, huh.”

“Would that be it? According to your story, two years ago your beloved friend saw the stone just lying around—has its shape changed at all?”

“She said it hasn’t.”

Ordinarily, even if you almost tripped over it, no ordinary person would remember a rock, or the shape of one, from two years ago, but in that regard Tsubasa Hanekawa is no ordinary person.

She’d told me that though the last couple of years had weathered the stone somewhat, it’d had that same rugby-ball shape.

In other words, even if someone had enshrined it during those two years, the main body—the stone itself, had remained unaltered.

“Hmm. And what’s missy class president’s take on it?”

“Her take, well—”

Oshino always calls Hanekawa “missy class president.”

You’d think that since she hates being treated like a model student she wouldn’t be thrilled about that nickname either, but for some reason, maybe because it’s Oshino, she doesn’t particularly seem to mind.

Incidentally, the one time I tried calling her “missy class president” as a joke, she really went ballistic on me. I wasn’t sure I would ever recover.

“Hanekawa saw it when it wasn’t enshrined, so at the time she seems to have thought it was just a rock. But now, she’s researching our campus as a way to repay you, Oshino—and she noticed how something’s happened to the rock she stumbled across two years ago. She found it really unsettling—or something.”

“Unsettling,” Oshino repeated the word back to me. “Sure, it must be unsettling when what used to be just a rock is sitting in some shrine—though I can’t begin to guess, ha hah, if missy class president actually finds anything unsettling.”

“This is no laughing matter.”

Maybe the way Hanekawa talked about it made it seem that way, but—I dunno, some mysterious faith springing up on campus was thoroughly unsettling, and even if it weren’t, we couldn’t just let it go.

Even someone with as little school spirit as me felt that way.

“Well then, Araragi—seems like the first thing to do would be to investigate the origin of the sweets, but we’re talking about missy class president here. Maybe she did that before she even talked to you?”

“…”

Acting like he saw through it all, that was Oshino.

For some reason it grated on me this was Hanekawa he was pretending to get; it was a strange feeling. *As if you know so much about someone you just met*—yet I myself had gotten to know her only a few days before him.

When you got right down to it, I didn't know a damn thing about her.

"Yeah," I said. "From the brand and time of purchase, calculated backward from the sell-by date, she nailed down which shops they could've been bought in and the students most likely to buy them—"

"A regular Sherlock Holmes. Did she make enquiries?"

"No, not yet, apparently."

"Maybe she felt like that would be rushing things?"

"No. She figured out that whoever left the offerings wasn't acting alone, an unspecified number of people seemingly left the sweets and whatever else at the shrine—in which case she needed to widen the scope of her investigation, and couldn't continue operating under the veil of secrecy."

"…"

"Which is why I'm here. You'd be interested in a story like this. She says it's her way of repaying you for looking out for us."

Judging that I'd more or less said what I needed to say, that was how I wrapped up my explanation.

Well, it was unclear if it was wrapped up, but in any case, it emphasized that I was there not to consult Oshino about a mysterious stone, but simply to do him the favor of delivering info about strange doings at our school.

If I didn't make that clear up front, my debts might balloon even further. True, since I already had no way of paying off the five million yen I currently

owed him, maybe it didn't matter if I accrued more.

I've heard that once the amount you owe grows beyond a certain point, you start not to mind not being able to pay it off, or taking on even more debt, and not necessarily because you've gone to pieces. I felt like I was standing on the edge of that precipice—which meant I really couldn't afford to get any more bills.

Since I couldn't risk incurring one of Oshino's consultation fees, on this occasion I had no choice but to act slightly, or flagrantly, like I was doing him a favor.

"Ha hah," Oshino let out a forced laugh, as though my ulterior motive was obvious to him.

Hanekawa had mentioned the "Cackling Woman" to me, and I bet the monster had the same sort of laugh.

"Wh-What?" I put on a show of consternation. Or if he really had seen through my little ploy, it wasn't a show, and my consternation was genuine. "S-So something like a school ghost story holds no interest for an expert, huh? You prefer something a little more difficult, based on archival evidence or whatever?"

"No, no, missy class president was right on that score—even a jack-of-all-trades like myself has his strengths and weaknesses. It can be a hassle to get ahold of stories from inside a closed space like a school—I'm grateful for the offer."

"O-Of course."

"Nevertheless, Araragi. This is a favor from missy class president, not from you, so it by no means cancels your debt. I eagerly await your consideration in

that regard.”

“…”

Well.

At least I didn’t incur any new debts. I guess that was all I could ask for.

I can’t deny I’d had my hopes up, but this seemed like a good compromise.

“I’m not sure it qualifies as a tale of an aberration—ha hah, but it’s a good story. Gotta be sure and write this one down.”

“…Oshino. Just for my edification, I’d love to know what you ultimately plan to do with all these ‘tales’ you’ve been collecting.”

“Hm?”

“Um, like, are you planning to put them in a book, or present them at a conference…or anything like that?”

There was no particular need for me to ask him about it right then, but I’d been wondering about it while I was talking with Hanekawa after school and I’d wanted to ask him if I had the chance.

At least to that extent, I was intrigued.

In other words, was this man, my savior so to speak, actually amassing aberrations as part of his occupation, or was he just insisting on calling his hobby “work” when he was actually unemployed…

“Ha hah. I’m not some sort of authority on aberrationology, so I don’t have such lofty goals. I do sell the stories I collect to interested parties, though.”

“Sell? And you get customers? They’re just ghost stories.”

“Says the guy who almost played the lead role in one?”

“Just curious, how much do you get for one?”

“Ha hah. I don’t know about divulging my negotiated prices to a supplier.”

“…”

If that was how he felt about it, what could I do but drop the subject, but charging me a fee for dealing with an aberration then turning around and selling the story to someone else did strike me as a pretty sweet business.

Is that what they call the middleman margin?

I’m sure it’s not as sweet as it seems to a neophyte, of course…but either way, simply finding out that Oshino derived an income from his fieldwork was enough for me.

“But, do you really think someone’ll buy this story?”

“Good question. I have one customer who’ll take anything and everything─but lately *that one* seems to have started behaving erratically again, and I get the feeling it’d be best to put a little distance between us. Not that I can go sell it to *him* instead…”

Oshino seemed to be thinking about how to monetize this, which seemed a little premature, like he was counting his chickens before they’d hatched.

A weird stone getting enshrined in a school flowerbed wasn’t going to interest anyone─it quite literally wouldn’t be worth the paper it was written on.

It’d take an expert to find an interesting way to spin it.

“So, what about it, Oshino?”

“Hnh? What about what?”

“That’s not fair, I asked you first… As an expert, what do you think?”

Running through all the pertinent points, I tried again.

“What was seemingly just a hunk of rock two years ago has, two years later, become an object of worship for some part of the student body─for an unspecified number of people, it’s become an aberration-y thing. Does that ever

happen?”

“It’s not uncommon for objects to become aberrations—after all, aberrations come into being according to some standard. And yet.”

“Hm?”

“It’s hard to say if it’s worshipped because it’s an aberration—or if it became an aberration because it was worshipped.”

“Is it worshipped because it’s an aberration, or is it an aberration because it’s worshipped?”

I only intended to repeat Oshino’s words back to him verbatim, but apparently I’d gotten something wrong.

“No, no,” he corrected, “It’s not ‘is it an aberration because it’s worshipped.’ It’s: ‘Is it worshipped because it’s an aberration, or did it become an aberration because it was worshipped.’”

“…? Sure, the wording and grammar might be a tiny bit different, but is it such an important difference that it’s worth harping on?”

“In this case,” said Oshino significantly. “But it’s a little hard to know just from hearing the story. Think you can draw me a picture of it, Araragi?”

“Huh?”

“You heard me. If you came here straight from school, you must at least have a notebook and something to write with.”

“I do, but…”

I’d never imagined I’d be asked to draw at that point. I was taken aback, but if that was what he wanted, I guess that was what he would get.

“To be honest, though, I’m not exactly artistically inclined. Even if I seem like I would be.”

“They never taught you to draw in art class?”

“Naoetsu’s a prep school, so they don’t put a lot of emphasis on the arts. And I didn’t take any art classes for my electives.”

“Hmph… Well, just do your best.”

“Roger.”

I ran my mechanical pencil across the page of the notebook I’d taken out. I was relying on memory—if it was two years ago, I’d have to admit that I didn’t remember, but it had only been a few hours. I might not be Hanekawa, but as a teenager and currently active high school student, my powers of recall could handle that much, at least.

“It’s about like this.”

“Nope, that’s not gonna cut it.”

Dismissed out of hand.

If I aspired to become an artist someday, that would’ve put an end to my dream.

Can’t you say something nice, even if it’s not true?

“Don’t ‘nope’ me. I tried my hardest to draw it the way it is. Maybe the lines seem a little wobbly, but that’s how the thing looks in real life.”

“That’s not what I meant. I need you to draw the shrine and altar, not just the stone itself.”

“Hunh? But—”

“Just do it.”

Urged to blindly forge ahead, I begrudgingly did as I was asked. Not like it was such a hassle to add in the shrine and altar—they weren’t exactly the most complex structures.

I've been calling it a shrine because I don't know how else to describe it, but it couldn't have been simpler. That is, if it hadn't been held together with some nails, it would've been just a pile of toy blocks.

"Oh, that kind of shape? The shrine, I mean."

"Yeah, but…" I said once I'd finished drawing everything. I almost wanted to add in a background for kicks but decided not to push it. "In terms of the altar, its shape seemed totally unremarkable, like it was no more than a tiny desk to put offerings on, but the shrine's shape felt like it was based on something, if only clumsily."

Scrutinizing the notebook, which I'd handed over to him, Oshino responded, "Yeah?"

"Was it at a temple? Or had I seen it around a Jizo statue or some roadside god, I dunno…but I feel like the shrine's shape rings a bell."

"Hey, if you've got tidbits like that up your sleeve, you've gotta tell me up front—was that supposed to be some hidden-ball trick revealing your erudition?" asked Oshino, smirking.

Judging from his tone, he was mocking me, rather than scolding me.

"No, it was a vague notion, and it only came to the forefront of my mind when I drew it out like this. In that sense—"

I only remembered thanks to your bright idea to have me draw it, I almost said before cutting myself off in a fluster. If I started throwing around words like "thanks" and "bright idea," he could hit me up for money—not that I actually thought he was that much of a money-grubbing miser.

I just felt wary, since the subject of money had come up.

Anyway.

“Um, but, I can’t specifically call anything to mind. It’s more like I’d seen it somewhere, like it wasn’t my first time ever… Can you tell, Oshino? If this shrine is modeled on some part of something—”

“No, I can’t say I recognize it. But…”

After saying *but,* Oshino fell silent and handed the notebook back to me. I felt a certain sadness that the masterpiece I’d labored over had outlived its usefulness in a few short minutes, but we weren’t critiquing my artistic skills.

“But what? Don’t start saying something and clam up—if you’ve got an inkling, tell me already.”

I’d meant to press him on the point calmly and rationally, but frustrated that my masterwork had been so useless, that he’d been such a dick about it after forcing a bad artist to draw, I ended up sounding a little heated.

But Oshino let my reaction roll off him like water off a duck’s back and simply came back with, “Ha hah. You’re spirited today, Araragi. Something good happen to you?” He added, “While we’re at it, I’d like to hear what *you* think about it. Boy, would I ever like to hear the erudite Mister Araragi’s opinion on the subject. What’s your take on this particular matter?”

“What’s my… Well, you said it yourself in passing. It might be a ‘school ghost story,’ but I’m not so sure it’s about an aberration.”

“A-ha. Meaning?”

“Well, this is a pretty boring, realistic interpretation, but I bet somebody, I don’t know who but somebody, started worshipping some stone that had landed in the flowerbed as if it were a god—I mean, a shrine doesn’t just appear out of thin air. A person’s got to build it.”

“A vampire, on the other hand, might be able to manifest one.” Oshino

turned his eyes to the little blond girl in the corner.

True, there were exceptions.

“But that shrine was obviously a human creation,” I objected. “It seemed that way to me, anyway. Though I’m not a hundred-percent certain…”

“Hm.”

“So in this case the somebody is plural, in other words an unspecified number of students started a little religion, or a faith group kind of a thing, and took that stone as their object of worship… Something like that?”

I wasn’t expressing myself well, and it was hard to put into words what the relevant questions were in this case, but the idea that a bizarre faith had sprung up at my school was definitely unsettling.

Or flat-out frightening.

“People have freedom of religion, ya know. It’s guaranteed by law,” Oshino reminded me.

“Right, no question about that—in this case, though, it’s clear from Hanekawa’s testimony that two short years ago this now-deified stone was nothing but a lump of rock—doesn’t that kind of give you the creeps?”

Unlike Naoetsu High, which had only been around for eighteen years, not long enough to develop a “school ghost story,” this venerated stone had just been a rock sitting by the roadside up until a couple of years ago, and that was difficult for me to accept.

I think that’s what it was.

“An aberration doesn’t have to have a history or pedigree, though,” answered Oshino, “since new aberrations are being born, being produced, all the time.”

“When something creeps you out, it’s because some kind of malign influence might be involved. That’s my hunch, and I believe that’s what Hanekawa’s worried about. In other words, someone’s knocked together this sham religion, fabricated this object of worship, and is taking a bunch of students for a ride—”

“For a ride? To rip them off for some cheap candy?”

“Well, I dunno.”

“If someone was going to take them for a ride, you’d think they’d do a proper job of it—I haven’t seen it for myself, Araragi, but as far as I can tell from your crude drawing, the construction of the shrine is itself quite crude. About as crude as the drawing.”

“Oshino. I’m well aware of how bad I am at drawing, but it hurts my feelings to hear someone else say it, okay?” Don’t make it sound like my crude drawing has made a crude shrine even cruder.

“Anyone who’s trying to take them for a ride would build a more impressive shrine, don’t you think? In order to fool people, work on the design—or so says a friend of mine.”

“Like you have any friends.”

“You’re right. Maybe not a friend.”

I was trying to get back at him by hurting his feelings, but not only did I fail, Oshino even smiled in apparent delight.

What the hell went on in his mind? It was a mystery.

“Not to mention, in that guy’s case, it might’ve been just another lie,” mused the expert. “Putting that aside, Araragi, how does it strike you?”

“Well, sure, I guess it makes perfect sense. If you were trying to take them

for a ride, you wouldn't use such a childish shrine. If you can't build one yourself, you might outsource the construction. So then, is it a genuine religion? It's part of their creed that they have to build the shrine themselves, no matter how broke-ass it is? I know we have freedom of faith in this country, but all the same, founding a new religion at your school is kind of…"

And why would anyone want to worship a rock that was just sitting there like that? It would be one thing if it were some kind of precious stone… Then again, maybe it was some kind of insane power stone, and Hanekawa and I just couldn't pick up on it?

"You'd sense something from a power stone, wouldn't you, in your present condition—hmm. Okay, listen, Araragi. This is the message I want you to relay to missy class president. Knowing her, it'll tell her everything she needs to know."

Forget about the "school ghost story" angle for the moment, the ever-smirking Oshino advised—for some reason with an even jollier expression than usual.

"Now *try taking a look at the Naoetsu High curriculum.* The lot of the student is to study, after all."

The next morning.

In homeroom, when I told the overly sagacious Tsubasa Hanekawa what the all-seeing expert Mèmè Oshino had said, she paused a moment then went, “Ah,” as though it indeed told her everything she needed to know.

What the hell was up with the both of them? It was scary.

Since the village idiot over here naturally didn’t understand any of it, I did my best to avoid voicing such rude sentiments and simply asked, “What’s it all mean?”

“Hm? Oh, no, just that I was jumping at shadows this time around—man, I really let you and Mister Oshino see an embarrassing side of myself. Not just a swing and a miss, a full-on strikeout.”

“That still doesn’t tell me anything… An embarrassing side of yourself? Did I miss something? Come on, what do you mean?”

“Nothing, really. This might sound like bullshit, but I had my doubts all along. If people were going to worship something, they’d do a better job of it—still, it was the very defectiveness of that half-assed object of worship and half-assed shrine that gave you the creeps and unsettled Mister Oshino, and that’s what was worrying me. I’m glad it was a false alarm.”

“Hanekawa, hang in there, I know you can find a way to explain it that even I can understand.”

“Hang in there?” Our class president’s face twisted into a wry smile. Apparently my wording had tickled her. “Listen, once all the evidence is neatly

lined up, everything turns out to be totally fine. Up until now, you and I had both been focusing on the rock itself, right?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah…but what's there…apart from the rock?"

"The shrine. Focus on the shrine."

"The shrine?"

"Yes, the shrine. If we'd focused our attention on it instead, we never would've had to bother Mister Oshino."

Bother my ass, all he did was sit in an abandoned building and listen to me talk…

"Focus our attention on the shrine… Where does that get us? That raggedy-ass—"

"Okay, um, I'll put this as plainly as I can. I'm pretty sure the rock wasn't put in a shrine in order to be worshipped—it was chosen as *a thing to put in the shrine.*"

"How's that different?"

"It's totally different. A shrine is only ever the container and not the object of worship—so at least, we can discount the possibility that there's some bizarre religion at the heart of all this."

"Still sounds the same to me. If there's no religion involved, doesn't that mean somebody was trying to pass off some sham religion—"

"No, that was our false assumption," Hanekawa said. "*Since that shrine wasn't originally built to be a shrine.*"

"…?"

"About the Naoetsu High curriculum—I don't have to look at it again to understand because I'd checked it out before I took our exams."

So she'd done that, after all.

Gives me the willies.

"Look, when we were first-years, we had to pick an art elective—I took fine art, but they also offered calligraphy and technical arts, didn't they? Mister Oshino was specifically nudging me to consider the curriculum for the technical arts class."

"Technical arts?"

"Yup. You know, woodworking and stuff. And the curriculum for that class includes a *freestyle shed construction* project—something along those lines, anyway."

"…"

"I didn't actually take it so I can't say for sure, but I can only assume that the shrine in question was *a shed built for that class.*"

"…"

"And judging from the workmanship, I'd say it was a reject—this is just a theory, mind you, but I think this is more or less how it went: Some student tried to build a shed for technical arts but botched it. Having built the thing in class, the student was instructed to take it home. It would just get thrown out once he or she got it home, though, so off this student went to the garbage area to surreptitiously get rid of it. And passed by the flowerbed on the way."

True enough.

There was a garbage area near the flowerbed.

A piece of junk that large wouldn't fit in the classroom trashcan, so the logical course of action was to take it outside and put it straight into the garbage.

"As our hypothetical student passed by, he or she laid eyes on the rock in

question—or maybe tripped over it, like I almost did. Either way, finding this appropriately sized rock, the student figured that even a botched job might look surprisingly good with a rock in it…"

It wasn't that the rock looked like a stone statue—because it was inside a shrine.

It was that some scraps of wood looked like a shrine—because there was a rock in it.

Like the simulacrum phenomenon—or, not quite.

But a reject.

A botched job, ceased to be a botched job.

"So it was the opposite—the reverse," I managed to get out, in a trembling voice.

"Yup. Of course, it isn't any less crude, but at least it went from being a botched job bound for the dump to looking like a shrine—a shed, so the student just took off and left it there. Thus a stone statue worthy of worship was born."

"What about the altar…and the offerings of candy?"

"I assume the altar got there in more or less the same way. I don't know if it was for class or a club or what, but some other student must have 'botched' a project and figured it'd look like an altar if it were left in front of the shrine… As for the candy, I imagine either the gardener or some students passing by the flowerbed had some with them and left it there for no particular reason."

"…You mean they just kind of leave an offering because it seems like the thing to do, and not out of anything as overblown as faith?"

"An offering, or maybe they just left whatever candy they hadn't eaten during the day before going home… It was always a possibility, but if the stone

isn’t religious in origin, then that’s the most likely scenario.”

Right…

Cheap candy—not even loose change—has a strong “I chucked what was left over” vibe…

“I don’t know who’s in charge of the flowerbed,” I said, “but wouldn’t that person dispose of a shrine that suddenly showed up one day?”

“Nah, most people don’t destroy something that looks like a shrine without a second thought. Why invite divine retribution.”

“Fair enough…”

And after a while, they start to take its existence for “granted,” I suppose.

They don’t ask where it came from.

They take for granted—the “gratitude” they feel for its grace.

“…”

“Phew, I feel so much better!”

Hanekawa stretched happily.

For someone like her, “not understanding something” must be a source of stress, because she smiled as if she really did feel much better.

“I see… Something still doesn’t sit right with me, or rather, I’ve got some feelings about that conclusion—”

“Forget about it. It’s all thanks to you, Araragi.”

“Huh? It is?”

“I mean, wouldn’t you say Mister Oshino was only able to figure it out because you told him the shrine ‘rings a bell’? Even he couldn’t if he didn’t base his judgment on the proper material—and how could he predict what the curriculum of a ‘closed space’ like a school might contain? It’s not because it

was modeled on something that you recognized it, it's because you'd made something like it yourself for class. The art elective you took was technical arts, wasn't it?"

"Well, yeah…that would be it."

I hadn't seen it at a temple or by the side of the road.

I'd seen it—in the school woodshop.

When Oshino demanded that I draw a picture of it, probably it was just to learn the shrine's shape—but witnessing my reaction when I *recalled as I drew,* he hit upon the truth. That was how it had gone.

That was how, but…

"Okay, case closed—wait, Araragi, where are you going? Class is about to start. Hey, c'mon, don't run in the halls—"

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

Paying no heed to Hanekawa's injunction, I ran down the hallway and out of the building towards the quad, to the flowerbed, and once there I picked up the shrine housing the rock that resembled a stone statue and smashed it on the ground.

"Huff, huff, huff, huff…"

I mean.

There was no point in smashing it at this point—but I couldn't help myself, I completely dismantled the shrine, reducing it to its constituent scraps of wood.

Even if I hadn't, the second it no longer surrounded the rock, it was nothing more than that—in any case, I carried the scraps over to the garbage area.

The completion of a trip begun two years earlier.

"…"

Yes.

Needless to say, I was the one who had built the shrine for woodworking two years earlier and left it in the flowerbed, more or less just as Hanekawa surmised, instead of bringing it home.

The reason it rang a bell wasn't that I'd made something like it myself for class—I'd made *it* myself.

I'd completely forgotten about it.

Even if I couldn't remember things from two years back like Hanekawa could, this was pushing it. I'd said all kinds of horrible things about it, called it a

crude, childish, raggedy-ass shrine, but it had been my own handiwork all along.

Now I understood Oshino's detestable little smile.

He must've been holding in a massive burst of laughter—Hanekawa might have shown us an embarrassing side, but it was nothing compared to me.

Happily, Hanekawa (who probably assumed that no one could forget, so completely, something that happened only two short years ago) didn't seem to have caught on yet…but I was so ashamed that I didn't feel like I'd ever be able to look her in the eye again.

That said, my attendance record was dangerously poor and she had ordered me to turn over a new leaf, so if school was about to start, I had no choice but to return to the classroom.

As I trudged away from the garbage area, I caught sight of the stone that up until recently had been ensconced in a shrine. Yup, now it just looked like a regular old rock.

Nothing but a rock.

Immobile.

The offerings of candy were still there, but that alone wasn't enough to make it look like a stone statue or an object of worship—if someone cleaned up the cheap candy, no one would ever leave another offering there again.

It made me feel a little guilty about having destroyed the shrine in the throes of my humiliation. Having built it myself, though, I knew better than anyone that absolutely no divine retribution would be forthcoming…

Yet I still felt a little bad for that rock. Thanks to my sheer laziness and shame at the thought of taking my failed creation home, it had been on a real rollercoaster ride, now worshipped as a god, now reduced to a regular old rock.

Apologizing to a rock is kind of weird, but… I entered the flowerbed and lifted the stone off the ground.

Is it worshipped because it's an aberration, or did it become an aberration because it was worshipped, Oshino had asked.

Undeniably, this rock had "gone" so far as to receive offerings, even if they were only cheap candy. Realizing how my unprincipled behavior might have turned it into an aberration made me feel even worse.

A stone we took for granted.

Became a statue whose grace we took to heart.

It could have turned into a graceless aberration—its origins no longer relevant.

Graceless or not, it would have come to be taken for granted.

That day could have arrived.

The thought struck me, and in turn, drove home another. Maybe I shouldn't be attending school without feeling much of anything.

If the teacher wasn't there yet when I got back to the classroom, I'd ask Hanekawa. Did my failure to be grateful for everyday life mean that I was like a stone, or that I was made of wood?

Though if stone can become statue—and wood a shrine, maybe it wasn't such a bad thing.

"Huh? What the…this rock."

And that's when I noticed.

It was the texture that did it, though I hadn't noticed two years earlier. No question about it, though, this texture, this feel.

"It's concrete?"

CHAPTER TWO
KOYOMI FLOWER

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

5
May

001

I don’t mean to sound like a whiner, but in early May, in other words around the beginning of Golden Week, when a strange fate bound me to Hitagi Senjogahara, I was both mentally and physically spent. Mentally and physically spent, or beaten to a pulp—at any rate, I was a mess.

Or should I say a bloody mess—such a mess that the idea of an ordinary life didn’t even seem real to me anymore.

Only the deck separates us from hell—I believe fishermen on the high seas use that expression, but it seems like pretty much the same thing on land.

Only the ground separates us from hell.

I’d become painfully aware—how unreliable the ground we walk upon is, how fragile the Earth’s crust, how easily it can give way.

I’d become aware of it along with the pain.

I had come to know how precariously balanced it all is—the road I blithely take to school, the road I blithely take home, how blithely it might all collapse.

Come to know?

Uh-uh.

I don’t know anything—I don’t mean to sound like Tsubasa Hanekawa, the girl with the mismatched wings, but I really only know what I know, and what I know is that I’m a fool.

Hitagi Senjogahara.

My classmate, who some kids called the Cloistered Princess, well, she knew how fragile everyday life could be long before I learned that lesson.

You could say she'd had no choice but to learn it from her life, her lifestyle. Even lending half an ear to the more restrained rumors I'd heard about the fraying tightrope of her life thus far was enough to scare me half out of my wits.

"To begin with, it's a mistake to imagine that there's a wall between the ordinary and the extraordinary—you have to distinguish between the two, of course, you can't go on living if you don't, but they're contiguous—here and there are connected," she said flatly, in an even, level tone devoid of emotion. "It's not a question of above or below—you don't fall from the ordinary into the extraordinary, and you don't crawl up out of the extraordinary to the ordinary. It's more like you're walking along and suddenly you're somewhere else, somewhere you don't recognize…"

Like straying from the path?

You're walking along the sidewalk when suddenly you realize that you've stepped out into the street without knowing it—her analogy made sense, more or less.

It's certainly true.

That if there were no guardrails or crosswalks, there'd be no distinction between the sidewalk and the street.

"Right. And before you know it you've been in an accident—though between the car and the pedestrian, who's to say which is ordinary and which is extraordinary. And there are things like your bicycle, Araragi, that blithely move between the street and the sidewalk…"

Strictly speaking, it contravenes the traffic laws to ride your bicycle on the sidewalk, but then again, from the cars' perspective it's a pain in the ass to have people riding in the street. Modern problems, right?

“Yup. In other words, you can still get into an ‘accident’ even if the ground you’re walking on doesn’t collapse, even if you keep to the straight and narrow—and not because you’ve lost your footing and fallen from the ordinary into the extraordinary. But you know, Araragi,” continued Senjogahara without much in the way of emotion. “Sometimes you fall from ordinary into ordinary. And sometimes you crawl up out of the extraordinary and find that wherever you are now is extraordinary too.”

“Ah, that must be it. I’ve been feeling kind of nauseous, but now it makes sense, it’s because I’ve been walking with you, Araragi.”

“Wha?! You trying to breach my defenses with some inner monologue about an epiphany you supposedly just had?!”

May ninth.

Tuesday evening—I was on the way back from that ruined cram school with Hitagi Senjogahara. Like a proper gentleman, my intention was to escort the young lady to her door, but her attitude was intensely harsh and dreadfully prickly.

“What’s that? You can’t go around listening to other people’s inner monologues, Araragi. Were you raised in a barn or something?”

“I didn’t go anywhere, your shit-talking came to me!”

“Feh. And I meant it as a compliment.”

“Don’t start acting like some cynical character! I can give you the benefit of the doubt till the cows come home, but there’s no way ‘being with you makes me feel nauseous’ could be a compliment!”

“I wonder, do you think it might be morning sickness?”

“So being with me makes you feel pregnant?!”

No.

That still didn’t sound like a compliment.

“It was just a token of my desire to tout your manliness to the wider world.”

“That’s one hell of a negative campaign. That’s only promoting my cons.”

“But you know, Araragi, your own inner monologue’s been making a real racket this whole time.”

“Huh? That’s odd, I could’ve sworn I was talking with you…”

Felt like I was taking a wound about once every five seconds.

What the hell was I chatting with?

A girl, or a sword?

“…”

Well.

Nevertheless, a thoroughly gentlemanly interpretation would be that this attitude of Hitagi Senjogahara’s—of this classmate of mine—was understandable. I really did have to plumb the uttermost depths of gentlemanliness, but I managed to understand it.

She’d been in constant misery, after all—so miserable that she couldn’t even experience misery.

Misery so constant that she wasn’t even numb anymore, she’d become an addict.

The misery of illness.

She’d been constantly struggling with illness—and thanks to her accidental brush with me the previous day, a period had been put at the end of that sentence of struggle.

Though saying it was thanks to her brush with me sounds kind of self-aggrandizing. Even if she’d never met me, I’m sure she would’ve rescued herself from her own plight eventually—but that’s neither here nor there.

With Oshino’s help, we’d more or less taken care of her aberration-based malady—that had been just last night, and today we’d gone to see him again to

tie up the loose ends, or to deal with the final cleanup, or to take care of the last few minor issues that had cropped up.

And now we were headed home.

For Senjogahara, it was all so new—it made sense that she couldn't just turn off this prickly personality, cultivated to combat her illness, like flipping a light switch. As her friend, I simply prayed that at some point her thorns would be blunted.

"But you know, they say that you really learn to feel grateful for good health when you recover from an illness, but after having been sick for so long, even 'walking along' like this feels totally novel to me."

"Hmm, I bet."

"I feel like I'm in a completely different world."

"A different world, huh?"

The part about walking feeling novel sounded like an exaggeration, but maybe that was her genuine impression after having been mired in fakeness.

Incidentally, I'd ridden my bike to the ruined cram school the night before, but that day I walked there and back with her. Circumstances—or inconveniences stemming from the previous night's resolution had ruled out my bike.

Happily, those inconveniences had been taken care of once and for all, so starting the next morning I'd be riding my beloved mountain bike around town again, the thought of which made me want to skip all the way home.

But I couldn't even imagine the lengths to which Senjogahara, walking along beside me, would go to mock me if I did, so I settled for walking.

"By the way, Araragi. Since by some miracle you're walking with a girl, how about you walk between her and the street. You really are a tactless piece of

shit, aren't you?"

"…"

I didn't even have to skip for her to mock me.

She was right, though, I was being thoughtless, so I went around to stand on her left.

And I told myself, *What's this, she's trying to raise me to be a proper gentleman,* so it didn't even hurt my feelings.

"Do you mind not standing on my left? I see what you're up to, you're after my heart."

"…"

She'd set me up.

It was a little too predictable.

As her friend I'd wanted to pray for her thorns to be blunted, but never mind the prayer, the friend part was starting to come into question.

"You seem plenty lively," I said. "Maybe you don't need me to walk you all the way home. See you around…"

"What are you talking about? If you're going to walk me home, walk me all the way home. What if word got out that a boy only walked Hitagi Senjogahara partway home? My reputation as the Cloistered Princess would be ruined."

"Self-involved much?"

"If you bail on me here, I'll spread the rumor that you tried to kill me."

"I see you're not too worried about other people's reputations."

Plus, who the hell would believe it?

I'm not exactly renowned as an assassin.

"You don't have anyone to spread rumors to anyway."

“Don’t worry, I’ll just mutter endlessly to myself about it in our classroom and all around school.”

“Hard not to worry about a girl like that.”

I’ll walk you home already, I shrugged.

I’d intended to do it out of the goodness of my heart, but it somehow ended up feeling more like an obligation—that was fine, though, it’s not like I had anything else to do.

I didn’t care to be “silenced” for saying the wrong thing like the day before—I’d already given her back the arsenal of office supplies I’d confiscated.

“Now then… What about it, I wonder.”

“Hm? What about what?”

“Uhh, give me a second. I’ll think of a way to put this that even Araragi will be able to understand.”

“How about thinking of a way to put it that won’t piss Araragi off instead.”

“Look, Mister Oshino demanded a fee for this, right?”

“Oh. Yup.”

One hundred thousand yen.

It might not be a huge sum in comparison to the five million that I owed him, but it was still a lot for a high school girl.

The thing that somehow felt worst about it was that one hundred thousand yen seemed calculated to be just within reach, even considering Senjogahara’s family circumstances—it made you think *I’ll work it out somehow.*

“Do you have any savings or anything?” I asked.

“None at all. In fact I’m in the red.”

“Huh? Your parents would be one thing…but you, yourself? Not counting

Oshino?”

“Uh huh. My team finished last year’s pennant race with a four-game deficit.”

“Do you own a professional baseball team or something?”

She was a multi-millionaire in that case.

Just pay off the hundred thousand right now.

Put it on your credit card.

But even if she didn’t have other debts, I believed the part about not having any savings—in which case Senjogahara was going to have to find a way to save up a hundred thou.

“I guess I’ll just have to get a part-time job at a fast food joint like Mister Oshino said.”

“Well, he didn’t say anything to either of us about a deadline, so I don’t think you need to be too worried about coming up with a plan to get the money.”

“Unlike you, Araragi, I try to be scrupulous about money.”

“Don’t just assume that I’m careless with it.”

“If I’m going to default on my loans, I’ll default on them properly, and if I’m going to pay them off, I’ll pay them off properly.”

“…”

Is there a proper protocol for defaulting on your loans?

In any case, I had a hard time picturing Senjogahara working part-time at a fast food joint…

“Hi, welcome. You’re taking this to go?”

“Offer them the option to stay. Don’t be so eager to send ’em on their way.”

“Would you like *fries* with that?”

“Why say it like a native English speaker?”

“Would you like some *potato* with that?”

“Now it sounds like I’m going to get a raw potato…”

“Hmm. Sounds like I’m not cut out after all for a part-time jibe.”

“If it’s jibes we’re talking about, you’re cut out for overtime.”

And then—something occurred to me.

Something I’d talked about with Hanekawa the previous month, about how Oshino’s “line of work” was collecting tales of aberrations and selling them off for a pretty penny…

“Senjogahara. Do you know any scary stories or anything?”

“Sure, if you count walking with you like this.”

“That doesn’t count.”

“Then no, I don’t.”

What a harpy.

I’ve heard of abusing the kindness of others, but being abused before you’ve even gotten the chance to be kind? A rare bird indeed.

I said, “Listen, I was just thinking. As an expert, Oshino’s doing his part to collect tales of aberrations—so if you know any unusual ones, any rare urban legends or anything, you might be able to take care of your debt that way.”

“Hmmm, like a barter, you mean. That’s not a bad idea, Araragi, especially given that it came from you. I shall grant you my praise.”

“…”

A simple thank you would’ve sufficed.

Of all possible expressions of thanks, “I shall grant you my praise” has to be the least gratifying to receive.

“Unfortunately, though, I don’t know any above and beyond the one I personally experienced.”

“I don’t think there’s any above or beyond when it comes to aberrations.”

“Ooh, thy words come from on high. Not for nothing has he associated with the king of aberrations, his esteemed lordship Araragi’s pronouncement is precious, so very precious.”

“Esteemed lordship…”

“Indeed, from the lofty perch whence his lordship condescends to view the world, all aberrations, all mysterious phenomena, must appear equal, but for a lowly worm like myself, crawling through the mire, the difference is quite pronounced, O Araragi the Great.”

“O? The Great?”

Hmm, she was usually domineering, but this submissive act really worked for her…

“Greek mythology tells of Ajax the Great and Ajax the Lesser, but what a title to append to a person’s name…” she observed. “I would never call anyone the Lesser.”

“Sure, calling someone the Great is all well and good, but Lesser is just cruel.”

“Isn’t it, Araragi the Tiniest?”

“My name’s one thing, but if you’re talking about my height I must protest in the strongest possible terms!”

“What, should I call you The Grand Araragi, then? O Grand Araragi.”

“…”

Obsequiousness suited her…

This could be a problem.

“Anyway, I don’t know any tales of aberrations. I’m fundamentally no good with scary stories. Even worse than I am with mindless labor, so I guess I just need to find a part-time job.”

“Hmmm… I mean, sure, do what you feel.”

To me, scary stories seemed like nothing but her forte…or to be honest, I felt like my first encounter with her yesterday had been one hell of a “scary story” itself.

The Madness of the Stapler Lady.

Mightn’t Oshino pay for that one?

To the tune of oh, say, around five million yen?

“You’re thinking something rude, aren’t you, Araragi.”

“So pointlessly perceptive…”

I’m not even allowed to gripe in my own head?

She was a little too worried about unfavorable reviews.

“Let me make this clear, Araragi. No internal freedom is allowed within five hundred feet of me.”

“Despotism.”

“Your unfreedom of expression, unfreedom of faith, and unfreedom of thought are guaranteed.”

“Tyranny.”

With a surprisingly wide jurisdiction!

Quite an individual.

“Some call me the Red Queen.”

“What, is this *Through the Looking Glass*?”

“Or they call me a red herring.”

“Sounds fishy.”

“Some also call me a red flag. A flaming red fake.”

“What kind of an alias is that? It sounds cool, but it just means you’re a pariah.”

“Huh? Right, why am I such a pariah… Will my life play out okay?”

Suddenly ill at ease, Senjogahara halted and began to worry for real.

So emotionally unstable…

I’d been relatively serious about parting ways partway home, but it didn’t seem like I could leave a girl like her alone on a public road. I figured it was my duty as a friend to see her all the way home. I mean, even if we weren’t friends, it was my civic duty.

“This is bad, Araragi. I’ve got to start getting on people’s good side. I’d hate being second only to you on the world’s shit list.”

“…Hey, do you want to be my friend, or not?”

“Of course I do. I want to be your *frenemy.*”

“Isn’t that a combination of ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’?!”

“Yup. In other words, we’ll be both friend and foe…”

“Wait, isn’t a friend who’s also your enemy just an enemy?!”

She was trying to make it sound like a healthy rivalry.

I so lacked any reason to compete with her.

“By the way, I can’t stand people who go around saying ‘OMG, I don’t have any friends’ but have friends they can say it to,” she declared.

“…”

So narrow-minded.

A little too intolerant.

“Makes me want to teach them what it really means not to have any friends.”

“It’s fine, ease up. Now you’ve got me.”

“Hmph.”

Senjogahara looked at me.

And what a look it was.

Like her eyes might swallow me whole—I wondered, considering what I knew of her personality, if she also hated people who claimed to be her friend, like me?

Hmmm.

Maybe this wasn’t going to go the way it did with Hanekawa…

“Feh. I suppose you’re right,” she said after what seemed like forever—without producing either stapler or box-cutter.

I was more relieved than I could ever remember being.

“I’ll ease up this time, out of the goodness of my harp seal.”

“Harp seal?”

“I thought turning a sentence ending into an animal might be cute.”

“I can’t get a read on your personality…”

A puzzling point.

Past the point of puzzling.

Then again, was this just her way of hiding her embarrassment? In which case, maybe there was some cuteness in there somewhere.

“A scary story, huh? I wish I did know one.”

Even though she’d adopted the part-time job plan, she acted as if she wasn’t

done considering mine.

Though maybe that was still just her hiding her embarrassment.

“Of course we could always make one up,” she concluded.

“Nope.”

Not cute, after all.

How could she calmly discuss passing off some bullshit to my, to our, savior?

“Yeah, you’re right… If I tried to cash in on a lie, I’d be no different from that low-life jerk.”

“Huh? ‘That’ low-life jerk? Who do you mean?”

“Hm? Oh, sorry… Anytime I say ‘low-life jerk’ I mean you.”

“Even in this context?!”

“Hey.”

With that interjection, Senjogahara, who had come to a halt, suddenly started moving—not forwards, but sideways. In other words, she made to hop from the sidewalk into the street.

I couldn’t begin to figure out why she tried to all of a sudden. Still, even though we hadn’t known each other for very long, I was already somewhat accustomed to her erratic behavior after a couple of days together, and I reflexively blocked her movement.

By putting my arm around her shoulders.

I was blocking the momentum of another person’s entire body, even if that person was a girl, so as you might expect I felt a real heft—unlike.

Unlike the day before, when I’d caught Senjogahara on the stairs…

“What.”

“Huh?”

“Getting a little familiar, aren’t you?”

“Oh, my bad,” I said, removing my arm from her shoulder. “But you tried to jump out into the street…”

“What, you thought I was committing suicide? Impulsively?”

“Impulsively, or…”

Though I wasn’t going to say so out loud, I didn’t put it past her.

Her battle with illness may have ended, but I doubted her struggles were over—even apart from still having to go to the hospital for a thorough battery of follow-up tests.

“Don’t worry, Araragi. Unlike you, with your regimen of offing yourself three times daily, at mealtimes, I’d never kill myself.”

“I don’t have a prescription for suicide, okay?”

“Wha? Then how come all the girls in our class call you Johnny Suicide?”

“Wha? The girls in our class all call me that?”

Way to make you feel suicidal.

I’m pretty sure she *was* lying this time, but it bothered me nonetheless. I’d have to check with Hanekawa later on…though she’d be taken aback if I asked her flat-out, *What do all the girls call me?*

“Fine, Johnny Suicide wants to know why you tried to jump out into the street.”

“I wasn’t jumping out into the street, I just wanted a better view of that.”

“That?”

I looked in the direction Senjogahara was pointing, at the sidewalk on the other side of the street—and a telephone pole that stood there. Well, strictly

speaking not the telephone pole itself, but something at its base.

At a bouquet of flowers.

A brand-new bouquet.

There wasn't a stand or anything, but that had to be…

"I couldn't tell from my angle, since it was behind the telephone pole—and I wanted to get a better view. Guess there must've been a car accident somewhere around here."

"Seems like it… Recently, you think?"

The road that ran from the cram school ruins to Senjogahara's house wasn't the one I usually took, it being outside my territory, so even if there'd been a car accident, or really any kind of accident, I just wouldn't know…

"Anyway, if you got hit by a car because you were distracted by the flowers, the person who died would never be able to rest in peace. You've gotta be more careful."

Sadly, you sometimes heard about follow-on victims—distracted by a "Frequent Accidents in This Vicinity" billboard, they end up in a head-on collision, that kind of thing.

"I made sure there were no cars coming. No need to worry, low-life jerk."

"When that's how you keep referring to a friend, how could I not worry?"

Plus, I call bullshit.

She'd been totally distracted by the flowers. Taken together with her slip-and-fall on the stairs the day before, maybe she actually was pretty careless.

High-strung and careless… What a terrible combination.

She'd finally recovered from her "illness" but could still wind up dead if I didn't attend to her—what was she, an endangered species? Perhaps seeing her

all the way home didn’t cut it, better make sure she got safely inside.

Hmmm, this new friend of mine was a real handful…

“I just remembered.”

“Huh?” I cocked my head at Senjogahara’s sudden statement. “You remembered what? My dignity? The proper way to apologize to me?”

“I can’t remember something that never existed.”

“Is that right.”

“I remembered a ‘scary story’—so Araragi.”

“Yeah?”

“This is a command from Your Highness. Do what you gotta do.”

“…”

What kind of princess talks like that?

003

Obeying Princess Senjogahara's command, early the following day, May tenth, I visited the rooftop of a school building at Naoetsu High.

Alone.

Given how things had unfolded, originally the plan was for her to accompany me, but unfortunately she was obliged to begin a period of regular hospital visits that very day.

So I, as her "friend," ended up acting on her behalf—or I guess, was just getting used, but I really didn't have any reason to refuse.

It's not like I had anything else to do.

"'Preciate it. If things go well, I'll show you my tits again."

"Keep 'em to yourself."

And "again" my ass.

Somewhere amid this back and forth I readily agreed, and found myself visiting the roof as Senjogahara had asked.

"The roof? Of which building?"

"Whichever. They were all *like that.*"

That's what Senjogahara told me, so first I tried the roof of the building where my class was—though that makes it sound like I reached my destination by some legitimate means.

At Naoetsu High, however, the roofs are basically off-limits. The doors are kept locked, denying access to your average student, let alone your below-average one like me.

So how did I infiltrate the rooftop, how did I manage my illicit trespass? I went out the window of the top floor and crawled up the outside of the building, that's how.

One slip meant instant death.

I, myself, was hard pressed to understand why I was braving such dangers on behalf of a girl I'd only gotten to know the day before yesterday, but maybe I was just starved for something like a "favor to do for a friend."

Hrmm.

I'd already abandoned my belief that making friends would lower my intensity as a human, but confronted with this state of affairs, I had to admit I might not have been so far off the mark…

Let me note, for Senjogahara's honor, that I'm sure she wasn't expecting me to go to such great lengths.

Which is to say she'd suggested, "Ask your good friend Hanekawa. If she cooked up some reason to ask a teacher for the key to the roof, they'd happily give it to her."

Sure, most of the teachers would oblige, no matter how over the top the request was, if it came from a model student like Hanekawa—but I hesitated to bring it up to her. After Golden Week, I felt kind of awkward about asking her for anything.

Sure, it was a dangerous thing to do, and climbing up the outside of the school wasn't exactly my idea of a good time, but compared to the nightmare of Golden Week and the hell of spring break, it didn't strike me as all that risky.

So.

"Ah…it's true. Just as she said."

Once I'd clambered over the fence and had my feet planted on the tiles of the rooftop, I discovered that she hadn't been lying—did I think she had been? Well, yeah, I kinda thought she had been.

I mean, I'm sorry, but every other word out of that girl's mouth is a lie, I can't just blindly swallow everything she says.

Gotta keep your mouth shut and your eyes open, watch her like a hawk.

There, I got too preoccupied with having to watch her and put off explaining—I also didn't mention it earlier because I thought she might be lying—that what was "just as she said" about the roof of the school building was a bouquet of flowers.

A bouquet of flowers.

Someone had left a bunch of flowers wrapped in plastic by the fence—left, or offered, maybe?

Anyway.

There was a fresh bouquet on the rooftop, which was supposed to be off limits.

"…"

Apparently, when Senjogahara saw those newish flowers by the telephone pole the day before, she remembered this rooftop bouquet—which meant, conversely, that it had been such a trifling matter to her that she'd forgotten about it completely.

A trifling matter, easily forgotten and incidentally recalled.

And yet.

Trifling though it may have been—it also struck her as mysterious, I suppose.

“Hang on—how come you were up on the roof in the first place?”

The previous night.

Still thoroughly doubting her claim, I was questioning her so she’d back it up a little.

“How did you get onto the roof? It’s off limits.”

“I may not be Big Sis Hanekawa, but I’m a model student, too. I’ve got enough juice to wrangle the roof key out of a teacher with the right pretext.”

“Maybe, but don’t call her Big Sis Hanekawa.”

“My, my. So you’re the only one who gets to call her that?”

“I’ve never called her that.”

Senjogahara suspects, for no good reason, that I have an unrequited crush on Hanekawa. I have no idea on what basis…

“All right, for now. We’ll drop it. When, and why, did you go up to the roof? You spoke of a pretext, so it sounds like you weren’t being entirely truthful with the teacher…”

“Whoa, lame. Mister detective, showing off his powers of deduction.”

“…”

I guess I wasn’t allowed to read too much into Senjogahara’s words. She just lay into every single word I said. If I keep going at this rate this flashback is never going to end, so abridging those bits and getting to the meat of her story—

“When I matriculated at Naoetsu High, I had to consider my personal safety, okay? So I personally took considerable steps to safeguard it.”

Leaving aside the half-assed wordplay, Senjogahara was so wary of other people that she’d even given a false address for the class directory.

Hanekawa had researched Naoetsu High before taking the entrance exam

and after getting in; for reasons of her own, Senjogahara carried out an exhaustive study of where was safe and where was not, who was friend and who was foe.

We're not just talking about right after she enrolled. She undertook continual follow-up surveys for two years—she must've been aware of the little shrine in the quad that I'd recently destroyed but deemed it "safe" and not paid it too much mind.

And—she'd given the rooftop flowers a pass as well.

"It's no tale of an aberration, or a ghost story, but if you really think about it, isn't it mysterious?"

Yup.

It was mysterious.

Because, according to Hanekawa—

In the eighteen years of Naoetsu High's existence, there hadn't been a single incident like the death of a student—which meant.

This.

An offering of flowers, lain as if someone had jumped off the roof—was mysterious.

"…"

This wasn't like passersby leaving offerings of cheap sweets at some flimsy shrine. It felt formal…

I climbed up the ladder of the water tower on the roof, and from there I was able to confirm that the roofs of all the other school buildings—were also just as Senjogahara said.

A single bouquet of flowers lay on each and every roof. It was hard to say

for sure at that distance, but as far as I could tell, the flowers seemed to be the same kind.

"…"

Hanekawa.

She'd wanted to repay Oshino with some "school ghost story," but despite her research, this had escaped her notice—probably because she only investigated the *legal* areas of the school, unlike Senjogahara.

So Hanekawa didn't know everything, after all…though in this case what was funny, or scary, was that Senjogahara did know.

"No one's ever committed suicide by jumping off a building at our school, but bouquets of flowers continue to be lain on all the roofs, quietly, anonymously, unbeknownst to anyone—might this story interest Mister Oshino?" said Senjogahara, as expressionlessly as ever. In the same level tone she speculated, "Should be worth around, say, a hundred and twenty thousand yen?"

"…"

She was angling for a twenty thousand-yen kickback.

Man, she was weird…

She was warped due to her illness, or aberration, or so I had assumed, and of course she was, but it seemed like she'd been weird even before any warping.

Senjogahara said she was called the Cloistered Princess thanks to an act she put on, but if she hadn't put on that act, I wonder what people would've called her…

Whatever.

I'd confirmed her story—my next move should be to report the whole thing to Oshino.

That sounds a little indifferent, like I wasn't particularly interested in this case, but in fact I was curious how Oshino might interpret it.

Floral memorials to non-existent suicides.

Bouquets.

Was there some clear objective, some design, behind them or—

"More importantly," I muttered.

From atop the water tower.

"How do I get back into the building…"

“Going up is easy, but coming back down is hard—ha hah. Just like life. So, Araragi, how did you actually get back down?”

Whether collecting tales of aberrations was his hobby or his job, Oshino seemed to love hearing tales of my blunders, and he listened to this one with glee.

I’d hurried over to the ruins of the abandoned cram school as soon as classes ended that day, not expecting my own foolishness to be the first thing on the agenda.

A little blond girl watched me sullenly from the corner—she didn’t seem to think much of my stories, whether they were about aberrations or blunders.

I suppose no story involving me was pleasant for her to hear.

“Well, um, like anyone would, hanging in there like anyone would. I climbed over the fence and used my arms and legs to crawl down the wall and back in through the top-floor window I’d left open.”

“Ha hah. Sounds like you definitely hung in there, Araragi. Feeling nostalgic for your vampiric power? With that you could’ve just jumped off the roof, easy breezy.”

“Sure, but…nostalgic? Not a chance. Even the power of a pseudo-vampire is way too much for me.”

“Hmm. Speaking of the power of a pseudo,” Oshino said, indicating the girl in the corner, “come by sometime this weekend and give li’l Shinobu some blood, okay? If you don’t, the kid’ll croak.”

“…Got it.”

Right.

He’d given the little blond girl a name—Shinobu Oshino. Honestly, I still wasn’t used to it—but I couldn’t call her by her true name, so I just needed to adapt whether I liked it or not.

“Give, Shinobu, some blood,” I recited.

Be that as it may, I’d been coming to these ruins a little too often since Golden Week—why was I wasting the precious, one-and-only springtime of my high school years hanging out with some tacky old geezer in an abandoned building?

He’d been staying here long enough to transition from a tacky old geezer into more of a grubby one…

“…”

That said.

I don’t actually think of my high school years as a precious, one-and-only springtime—sure, it only happens once, and it is the springtime of my life, but precious?

One gust of wind and it’s gone—one moment of uncertainty and poof, that’s how light it seems to me.

The springtime of my life?

After spring—comes summer, that’s all.

“So, what do you think, Oshino? Is that story worth a hundred and twenty—I mean a hundred thousand yen?”

“Mmmm…”

“Hey.”

He was falling into his silent pondering routine, leaving me no choice but to press him for an answer.

“I mean, it doesn’t have to be the full amount. If a hundred thousand is too much, how about eighty thousand, or fifty thousand, or—”

“…”

“T-Twenty thousand.”

Damn, this ain’t working, I thought as I haggled.

Oshino wasn’t the kind of guy who gave much away in his face, but my intuition was telling me that, how do I put this, he wasn’t biting.

He’d shown at least some interest in Hanekawa’s story about the shrine—and might even have paid her for it if she’d asked—but this time around things seemed different.

“Do you have that missy’s phone number or email address, Araragi?”

“No, I haven’t asked for them,” I answered his abrupt question honestly.

“Should’ve the other day. So you have no way of contacting her, then?”

“Uh…I meant to ask her sooner rather than later…”

No need to make me look stupid.

I’m just not used to stuff like exchanging phone numbers.

“Why do I need to contact her?”

“I wanted you to deliver this message: ‘I regret to inform you that I cannot comply with your wishes, so please find another avenue for paying my fee’—”

“…”

Well, I had prepared myself for that, so it’s not like I was surprised.

And that wasn’t worth contacting her about—Senjogahara was already planning to get a part-time job to pay off the whole hundred thousand.

This was only ever the back-up plan…

I'd promised to let her know within the day if her long shot was worth anything. In other words, if she didn't hear from me, she wouldn't think anything of it and just start checking the help wanted listings for a part-time gig.

But, and I hadn't realized this until Oshino pointed it out, on the off chance that he was willing to pay for Senjogahara's story, not having her phone number meant having to go all the way to her apartment…

Which was crazy.

How mobile was I, unlike your typical high schooler these days—not that I'm claiming to be a typical high schooler by any means.

"Hmph. Well, the next time you see her at school, could you tell her formally?"

"Sure, but she'll be visiting the hospital for day treatment for a while, so I don't think she'll be at school… And when I do end up reporting back to her, she'll murder me if I don't give her a reason… Can't you tell me why this story isn't worth even a single yen?"

"I never said that. It's just that since I don't keep a ledger, I have to round off the small change or my accounting gets messed up."

"Small change…"

What did he consider small change?

Personally, I wouldn't call even a five hundred-yen coin change, but even if you did, getting rounded off felt harsher than simply being dismissed as worthless.

Totally inconsiderate…exactly the sort of thing the jerk would say. I was really glad Senjogahara wasn't there to hear it.

It might've turned into a battle to rival spring break and Golden Week.

Got to avoid that at all costs…

"Ha hah. You're spirited today, Araragi. Something good happen to you?"

"No, I dunno, I just want to be ready for anything, I guess…"

My response to Oshino's catchphrase couldn't but be sluggish as I mulled over what the future might hold. While he callously laughed off tales of my blunders, I guess he wasn't so inhuman as to laugh off my anxieties because he said, "Yeah? Yeah, makes sense. Ordinarily I would charge a consultation fee for this, but it's not like we're perfect strangers, you and me, so just this once I'll tell you something for nothing."

"…Thanks, you're a real life-saver."

I was trying to help him with his work, even if I had ulterior motives, so I wanted to object that I shouldn't be paying him in any case, but if it was going to be for free, we were all set.

However—"I'm not saving you. People just go and get saved on their own," was how Oshino responded. "First off, as for the site of that traffic accident you two happened upon—there was a fatality there last month. A pedestrian who was crossing the street got hit by a kei truck."

"Wow…okay. You're really well informed."

"It's close by is all, and Araragi, it's to collect tales of aberrations, with or without your help, that I've been poking around here and there—of course I'm informed."

"I see…"

That "with or without your help" felt pretty alienating, but I guess it was true. And Oshino made a point of talking in a style that pushed people away.

Even though I'd figured as much, the fact that someone had been killed in an accident was grievously tragic—but since I had no idea who they were or where they'd lived, there was a limit to how much I could grieve for their tragedy.

My thoughts could never measure up to those of the bereaved family that I assume placed the bouquet of flowers there, but I offered up a silent prayer for the deceased.

"Well, I'm not a traffic accident investigator, so I didn't look into it all that carefully…but that spot's layout seems almost designed to cause accidents," Oshino continued his exposition. "Though, apparently, the pedestrian's own recklessness was at fault this time…"

I had to wonder if he ever showed any respect for the dead, but if we're addressing the humanity of it, maybe I just came off as a hypocrite.

"Even if that isn't the case, and even if we're not talking about fatalities, there've been a whole mess of single-vehicle accidents and minor collisions—supposedly."

"Hmm, Senjogahara nearly leapt out into the street right there herself." She told me she'd made sure it was safe, but most people said so in that situation. And probably even after getting in an accident. "Oh, but I guess in her case, she was distracted by the bouquet of flowers—and it wasn't the layout."

"Uh huh. That can happen too. I'm concerned in that regard, but we don't want to ignore the feelings of the bereaved family. Next time I go out, I'll just change the placement of the bouquet."

"Yeah, please do."

In fact, I should've done that myself the day before—in which case, what

was I thinking, telling someone “please do” like that… Nothing at all, I have to admit.

Oshino was insensitive towards me, but he could be so attentive to these concerns…

“All that aside, let’s get back to the matter at hand, Oshino.”

“There’s no matter to get back to. We haven’t gotten off topic at all. Now then, the issue is that even though no one’s committed suicide by jumping off of one of the school buildings─or accidentally fallen to their death, someone has nevertheless left a bouquet of flowers on the roof of every building at your school─yes?”

“Um… Y-Yeah. That’s about the size of it.”

That Johnny Suicide nickname Senjogahara tried to foist on me must’ve colored my thinking on the matter, because it had never occurred to me that someone could’ve fallen off the roof accidentally.

I could’ve fallen during my climb that morning, for instance…

“Well, whether or not anyone actually falls off of it, a roof is an accident waiting to happen, isn’t it, Araragi? That’s why it was off limits.”

“Sure… At schools where it isn’t, there’s usually a ridiculously high fence. At Naoetsu High, though, it’s low enough that I could climb over it from the outside.”

“Indeed… Streets and schools are both prone to accidents and incidents─to put it plainly, I guess they’re like the opposite of power spots?”

“You mean spiritually poor places? Let’s see, I’ve heard about that stuff. Like how the northeast is called the demon’s gate─”

I hustled, once again, to trot out half-remembered lore, but Oshino shut me

down with a simple, “Nope, that’s different.”

He had no interest in cultivating my mind, did he?

What if I was filled with astounding potential?

For what, I’m not sure…

“There are, of course, spiritually poor places—I’m doing a little research on that subject even as we speak.”

“?”

“No, forget it. It’s still too early to talk to you about that, I shouldn’t have said anything. *Now* let’s get back to the matter at hand. We’re losing precious time because you keep derailing the conversation.”

“Come on, what’s the rush…”

I sort of felt like he was giving me the runaround, but…fine. I wasn’t interested in knowing the particulars of Oshino’s work.

Though he definitely seemed to be settling in for a long stay in a town that he’d originally only come to because of a vampire.

“We’re losing precious Times Square.”

“…If you’ve got time to make terrible jokes, I think you can make time for my little digressions.”

“That street isn’t so bad, but as a drifter, I’ve found accident-prone setups all over the country. This footbridge blocks line of sight, that construction will make it impossible to see someone coming the other way—and then there are spots that are obvious choices for suicides. What they call suicide hotspots… But that has everything to do with the terrain or the surroundings, and spiritual factors are irrelevant.”

“Huh, I guess I agree. Not what I’d expect an expert on aberrations to say,

though.”

“Well, I’m trying to counteract people’s tendency to chalk up anything negative to aberrations. Ha hah,” laughed Oshino.

Sounded commendable enough, but since taking on the negative aspects of society was part of their function, that threatened to turn into a chicken-or-egg argument…

“It’s not like I think this particular case has anything to do with aberrations, Oshino. It’s not a ‘scary story,’ or even a ‘creepy story’ like the one about that little shrine. Senjogahara herself had forgotten about it until yesterday, so it’s no more than a slightly niggling…‘mysterious story,’ I guess.”

“Are you saying it’s *Slightly Mysterious*?”

“I mean, I wasn’t trying to bring up Fujio Fujiko here.”

But something like that, yeah.

On the level of *what the fuck?*

The ol’ WTF.

“And like you said, the accident on that road probably wasn’t the work of any aberration—nor was Senjogahara’s attempt to leap out into it. That was just a question of the placement of the bouquet of flowers.”

“Indeed,” Oshino concurred. “The terrain or surroundings was the issue there, too, most likely—which is why I’m going to go change the position of that bouquet soon. Because, Araragi, *if an offering of flowers can invite accidents—don’t you think the reverse might also be true?*”

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The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

Though this time around, the punch line didn't actually come until much later—the reason being that "satisfied" by what Oshino said, the sense of "mysteriousness" cleanly swept away, I never ended up reporting back to Senjogahara about it.

And Senjogahara, never hearing back from me, left it alone—I'd figured I could give her the full report next time I saw her, but the next time I saw her, namely Sunday, May fourteenth, things got pretty hairy and this business just kind of, if I may, got lost in the shuffle.

Senjogahara must have forgotten about it again.

And so did I.

It wasn't until the end of May that I remembered—

"I just remembered," I said, finally telling her about it. "Basically they were part of the school's *roof supervision* policy—those bouquets."

"Roof supervision?" she reacted as if she'd only remembered because I brought it up. But being the brainy lady she was, it all seemed to come back to her in an instant.

"Yeah, just like managing the keys and putting up the fence—though compared to that, the bouquets seem more like they're for peace of mind, like a protective talisman or good-luck charm."

"How do bouquets—how does putting bouquets on the roof supervise anything? If it's supposed to be like a rooftop garden—it's in bad taste. Almost as

bad as your fashion sense.”

“There’s no call to bring my fashion sense into this.”

“What’s with that uniform?”

“Whatever you may say about my civvies, how can you talk smack about my school uniform?! Are you trying to make an enemy of every single boy who goes to Naoetsu High?!”

“What do I have to fear from them as long as you’re on my side, Araragi?”

“I’m on their side, dammit! Though it is in really poor taste, isn’t it…”

“Thank you.”

“I’m not talking about my uniform, I’m talking about the bouquets! It’s a tasteless tactic—and I don’t know who came up with it, but the bouquets, which basically say ‘someone died here,’ were in fact taking the place of a warning that ‘this place is dangerous’…”

“Taking the place of a warning? Like ‘Frequent Accident Zone Ahead’?”

“Yeah. Apparently, there are signs at suicide hotspots to try and dissuade people…though I’ve heard the same signs can also make them suicide hotspots in the first place. Anyway, someone must have decided that ‘danger’ signs are so ubiquitous that they’ve become ineffectual. It sends a pretty intense message, saying ‘someone died here’—”

“…”

Although, distracted by a bouquet, Senjogahara had jumped out into the street—Oshino called it “the reverse,” and the normal reaction to seeing one was to think, “There was an accident here, maybe this place is dangerous,” and to be extra cautious.

The school put the bouquets there.

To arouse caution.

“Kind of like how people hang up the corpse of a crow to drive off other crows?” asked Senjogahara. “They see the corpse and are wary of getting too close? But does it really serve any purpose beyond being a good-luck charm? It’d be different if, say, instead of a bouquet of flowers, they left some person who died in an accident…”

“Where do you come up with such horrifying ideas, are you a demon? Oshino said it was for peace of mind, or just a little playful inventiveness. Keeping the doors locked and putting up a fence is really plenty to keep people from falling—though it’s not a perfect defense. Since there are still students like you who lie their way up to the roof.”

“Hold it, Araragi. I don’t appreciate being called a liar. I’ve got a silver tongue, that’s all.”

“Don’t you mean an acid one? That silver’s gotta be pretty corroded by now. Listen, the point is, in the face of imperfect supervision, the school opted for a sort of protective charm to give them peace of mind—it’s not like anyone’s been leaving floral tributes for imaginary deaths.”

“Hmm…”

Makes sense, said Senjogahara, seeming convinced.

I mean, once you hear that explanation it seems obvious, it’s just common sense, no room for doubt.

Not at all mysterious.

Let alone aberrant.

The story held an unseemly interest—but to say the least, it wasn’t the type Oshino was interested in collecting.

No wonder he thought it wasn't worth more than pocket change.

Maybe Hanekawa knew about it—even the truth behind it, which is exactly why she hadn't brought it to him.

"But that just creates another mystery, Araragi. How could Mister Oshino be so sure? Had he encountered a similar situation? How could he have come to such a firm conclusion based only on what you told him?"

"I wouldn't call it a conclusion, exactly…but look. You and I made the same mistake. Whether it's an accident or suicide, if someone falls to their death, the roof isn't where you'd leave a bouquet of flowers."

"Ah."

"You'd leave it on the ground, where the person landed."

With a car accident you obviously can't leave an offering of flowers smack dab in the middle of the road where the person actually died—but if someone died falling off a roof, you'd ordinarily leave the flowers on the ground. Of course—since that's where they died, not up on the roof.

"I see, we were thinking about it all wrong. Though anyone would've made the same mistake."

"Really covered for yourself quickly there…"

"It's meant to deter people from falling, even if it's no more than a good-luck charm, so whoever put it there had to choose the roof despite the logical inconsistency—although."

I guess they won't be doing that anymore—said Senjogahara, looking up at one of the roofs, which were currently being renovated: a towering new fence was being erected around the perimeter.

Yes.

The roof improvement project was what made me remember the whole incident in the first place. And I finally made my report to Senjogahara, almost twenty days late…but that didn't mean I felt relieved or that a weight was lifted from my shoulders.

In fact, I'd felt much more at ease when I'd let the whole thing slip my mind—the reason being that the project had been deemed necessary thanks to rumors about "a student climbing up the outside of the building and onto the roof."

The school probably never imagined anyone would be stupid enough to try and get onto the roof from the outside—and a bouquet of flowers wouldn't be terribly effective against such a trespasser.

The cost of erecting new fences.

A hell of a lot more than a hundred thousand yen.

And if it came out that I was the trespasser in question—they'd do a hell of a lot more than just expel me. Senjogahara, who had put me up to it, naturally wouldn't be spared, either…

"Araragi."

"I know, I know, this is our secret."

"No, secret isn't good enough."

"Then what do we do?"

"What we've been doing."

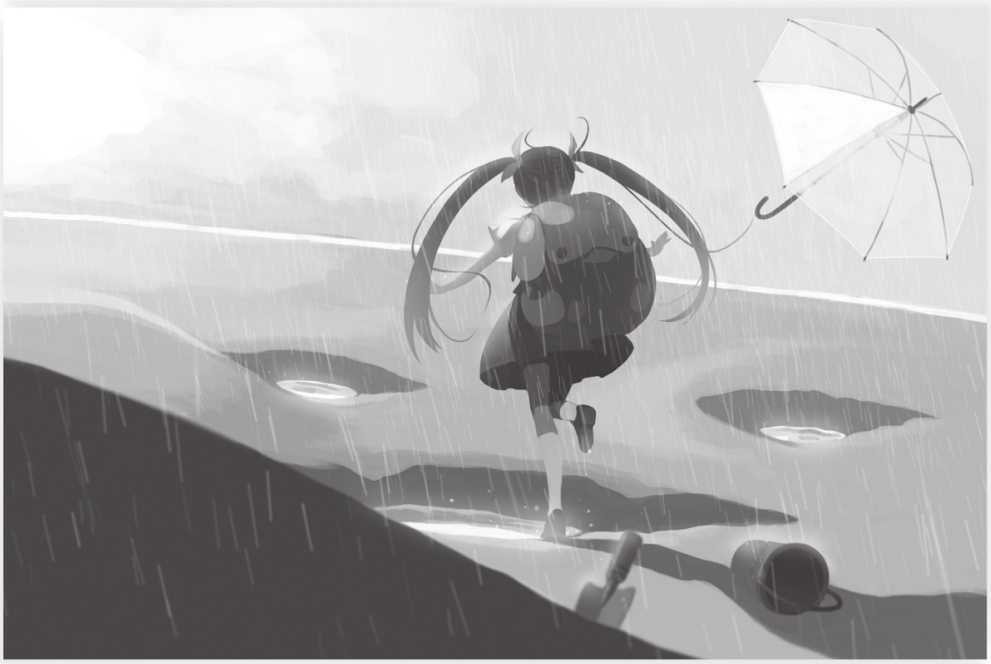
"What we've been doing?"

"We forget."

Though I've got to do something about the hundred thousand yen I owe Mister Oshino, before I forget—said Hitagi Senjogahara, in her usual level tone,

devoid of any discernable emotion.

CHAPTER THREE
KOYOMI SAND



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6
June

001

I first became aware of Mayoi Hachikuji—we first became aware of each other—in a park with an unreadable name, but thereafter our encounters always took place out on the road.

She'd gotten lost on the way to visit her mother, which was also how she ended up in that park, so I thought she might have her own take on the subject of roads, and at some point I asked her about it.

How.

How do you view the roads you walk down—which is the same as asking, *How do you view your own life?*

Just to be clear, I didn't necessarily think I was in much of a position to be asking such a question—and I was well aware as I asked it that whatever thoughts and feelings lay behind the way she chose to live her life were inconsequential to me.

If calling them inconsequential sounds inconsiderate, all I really mean is that it's Hachikuji's business how she lives her life—and if that sounds like I'm giving you the business, then let me rephrase: I just think she's free to do as she pleases.

Even a friend.

Even a selfless, peerless friend like Hanekawa—has no right to meddle in how a person lives.

Though maybe in how a person dies…

"Roads," replied Hachikuji, "are just someplace to walk, as far as I'm

concerned.”

Uh-uh.

That’s just the literal meaning of a road—I don’t mean that, or I mean that too, but I was thinking about roads in a more conceptual sense.

“No, no, Mister Araragi. It’s still the same. Roads are for walking.” Hachikuji didn’t budge in the face of my amended question. She just continued on with an amiable grin, as always. “A road, whatever road it might be, is a space that connects one place to another—wherever it begins, wherever it ends, that never changes. You wouldn’t normally call a dead end a road, would you?”

In other words, continued Hachikuji.

“You can think, *What kind of road is this, anyway,* or *Where does this road lead to,* or *This road is unstable, it seems like it might collapse at any moment,* or *I’d like to be on a different road*—but there is one thing you mustn’t do. The moment you break that taboo, the road ceases to be a road.”

I asked Hachikuji, seasoned veteran of wandering lost, what this taboo act might be, and here’s what she told me: “To stop walking.”

Once you come to a stop, that place ceases to be a road.

“Oh, hello, Mister Enoughararareready.”

“Come on, Hachikuji. Don’t make it sound you’re so fed up with our conversations that you’ve got tedium coming out your ears. My name is Araragi.”

“My bad. A slip of the tongue.”

“No it wasn’t, you did it on purpose…”

“A tip of the slung.”

“You telling me it wasn’t on purpose?!”

Sometime in mid-June.

Right in the middle of the month.

I caught sight of Hachikuji while I was walking down the street as usual, and I addressed her just like always─and as usual, she mangled my name.

In a nasty way.

Enough already?

We haven’t chatted enough for that. There’s a chat deficit here.

Lemme chat with you some more.

“Please don’t try to place the blame on me for mangling it. I was chatting away normally, but someone with an easily mangled name chanced to appear.”

“Why are you separating your chatting from the fact of my appearance? They’re inextricably linked. You didn’t start chatting until after I showed up with my easily mangled name.”

“And yet consider this, Mister Araragi. I frequently maul your name, but

you've never once mangled mine. The situation here is that only your name is getting mauled. You're the one at fault here."

"Don't try to logic it into being my fault. There are a few steps missing from your reasoning. You're the one who mauls my name, so it's your fault."

"Well, you could certainly say that I maul so involved."

"Ha ha, very funny. You're the *only* one involved."

My mind flashed to how I might mangle Hachikuji's name—Hachikuji, Hachikuji, Hachikuji…

Dammit.

Pretty easy to say.

"So, Mister Araragi."

Switching gears.

Hachikuji asked me, "Where're you headed today?"

"As you can see, I'm off to school. I told you the other day, didn't I? I've class-changed from a worthless washout to a responsible high school student. So I'm going to school."

"Irresponsible students go to school too, though, don't they."

"Listen, Hachikuji. Don't underestimate my previous irresponsibility. Where do you think I was going these past two years while I was pretending to go to school?"

"Where were you going?"

"Shopping, at the mall."

"Pretty weak irresponsibility…"

"And since I didn't have any money, I was only window shopping."

"Are you an adult girl?"

Well. Leaving aside how weird the turn of phrase “adult girl” is, I must admit that in retrospect my behavior was puzzling.

I ran the risk of getting caught by a truant officer because I wanted to look at the shop windows so badly?

My experiences from that period didn’t teach me a damn thing… They weren’t beneficial to my life in any way.

“…”

But I don’t think that was the point, I think I just didn’t want to go to school back then—and being at home was rough, too.

So I was probably happy to be literally anywhere else—that alone must have made me feel like I’d been rescued.

From what, I have no idea.

But like I’d been rescued.

“Phew… My, my. What an airy way of escaping from reality. Surface-to-air evasion, I’d call it. I’ve always known you were hopeless, Mister Araragi, but I never imagined you were so hopeless.”

“Hey, that’s kind of harsh.”

“Would you like me to call you Mister Sohopeless from now on?”

“Don’t do me any favors! You’re mangling my name so badly they’ll have to identify it from dental records!”

“Not exactly a name to leave for posterity, though, is it?”

“I’m not interested in going down in history, but even if I were, I sure as hell wouldn’t want it to be as Mister Sohopeless!”

Well.

“Surface-to-air evasion” just made it confusing, but an airy way of escaping

from reality? She hit the nail on the head there—how can I put this, if I'd gone on like that, things might've gotten pretty bad by now.

A lot worse.

Than simply straying from the path…

In which case, meeting Hanekawa over spring break, meeting Shinobu.

Meeting Senjogahara—might have been a huge turning point in my life.

"Hmm, you may be right," Hachikuji conceded. "Walking down the road also means meeting people."

"Whoa. Did you just say something positive, Hachikuji?"

"Yes I did. It's true, meeting those people might have been the halfway point in your life."

"No, a turning point, not a halfway point! I'm too young to be over the hill!"

"Well, they say geniuses and fools die young."

"You're clearly lumping me in with the fools! Halfway point, my ass! I'm eighteen, which means I'd die when I'm thirty-six!"

"Hm, that was unexpected. Who knew you could do arithmetic."

"J-Just how incompetent do you think I am?"

Don't you know math is my forte?

It's the sole basis for my class-change from washout to college hopeful, the only guiding light.

"But you know, Mister Araragi. Mathematical aptitude or lack thereof aside, isn't it kind of amazing that everyone can do multiplication and division? Everybody ends up more or less getting the hang of it, but it's actually pretty advanced stuff."

“Now that you mention it…yeah, for sure. I don’t know who decided it, or when, but whoever decided that kids would learn their times tables in second grade is kinda impressive.”

In which case, maybe it isn’t such a bad idea to teach kids in our country English when they’re little.

“Well, before I can tackle my college entrance exams I’ve got to graduate from high school first. I may have told you this before, but that’s why I’m still showing up for school. Impressive, huh? As impressive as whoever decided to teach kids multiplication in second grade.”

“But everybody goes to school…”

“By virtue of which, Hachikuji, I don’t have time to talk with you.”

I’d been pushing my bicycle along as I walked in step with Hachikuji, but now I re-straddled it. My school-commuter granny bike. Then again, my non-commuter mountain bike got smashed to bits in an unforeseen accident the previous month, so the prefix “school-commuter” was no longer really necessary.

When you think about it, it’s kind of odd to call it a granny bike when the rider isn’t a granny… And why shouldn’t grandma these days ride, say, a monster bike?

“Fare thee well,” I bade. “Be not downhearted. When you wish to see me again, I shall appear before you once more like a knight in shining armor.”

“So this is goodbye forever?”

“What do you mean! Wish for it, already! To see me again!”

“I’ll wince for it, maybe,” Hachikuji said disgustedly.

Making no attempt to hide how put off she was that I’d put on airs.

Being loathed by a child can deal massive damage, and when I tried to start riding away, I missed the pedal completely.

Having blown my chance at a smooth exit, I thought—*Hmm, gotta turn this into some kind of opportunity. Was there something I wanted to tell Hachikuji?*

A-ha.

Got it.

I hadn't told her about that yet.

"Hey, Hachikuji."

"What is it, Mister Remainder-of-1."

"Remainder-of-1? What the hell is that, did you get my name wrong again? Or did you just divide 3 by 2?"

"Oh, don't worry, this time it wasn't a slip of the tongue. It's your new nickname, since you're the one who's most likely to be left over anytime people are picking teams."

"Most likely to be left over…"

Why does everyone and their mother want to give me these horrible nicknames?

"There's something I have to tell you," I forged ahead.

"What is it?"

"Oshino," I said. "Mèmè Oshino—that middle-aged expert, your benefactor. He left town."

It was just the other day.

He took off as suddenly as he'd shown up, and probably in some other town now, he was collecting tales of aberrations as he'd done here—while also looking after this or that hopeless guy, the kind who exist everywhere, in other words

someone like me.

“I see… That was pretty abrupt, huh?”

“Well, yeah, it was definitely abrupt. He was a rootless vagabond to begin with, so from his perspective maybe he stayed here for a long time—oh, right, you never actually met him face to face, maybe you don’t care that much… But it’s not like you guys weren’t connected. I figured I ought to tell you.”

“Please, I do care. You can’t even hold a candle to how much gratitude I feel towards that man.”

“Being grateful is all very well, but do it without snubbing me along the way. I’m immensely grateful to him, too.”

“No matter how much gratitude we express for Mister Moshino, it would never be enough.”

“Moshino? If you’re so grateful to him, don’t make him sound like a phone booth where you can make wishes.”

“If we’re talking Moshimo Boxes, he’s more like Doraemon’s little sister Dorami’s. All decked out.”

“Decked out… Sheesh.”

“Huh, so in any case, Mister Oshino’s gone.” Hachikuji must have said “Moshino” on purpose (not that it isn’t on purpose when she mangles my name) because now she spoke his name normally, and nodded. “That spells trouble, though, doesn’t it, Mister Araragi. How will you ever subsist without him?”

“Um, it’s not like I’ll be sleeping on the street just because Oshino left?!”

He hadn’t been providing for me, or anything.

Sure, I may have leaned a little too hard on him regarding aberration-related matters—from now I was on my own.

We.

We had to walk our own road—standing on our own feet.

“Well, we might not end up homeless, but we’ll miss him. Oh, but Mister Araragi, if he’s gone, what about that issue?”

“That issue? Which issue?”

“Aaalways playing innocent. Aaalways getting up on your high horse. Aaalways keeping me on the edge of my seat. You’re one hell of a teaaase.”

“I can’t even guess what kind of character you’re trying to be…”

She rarely followed up with anything good when she was like this, and was preparing me for it—what was it this time?

“Oh, should I just leave it alone? Did I perhaps bring up a taboo subject? Am I touching on the dirty secrets of the Araragi industry?”

“The Araragi industry? What sort of insular field is that, I don’t form such a thing. Come on, Hachikuji, out with it. This is unlike you.”

“I’m not going to let anyone from the Araragi industry tell me what I’m like.”

“Whether or not I should be defining what you’re like is a fair question, but I’m not someone from the Araragi industry, okay? I’m Araragi, period.”

“Ugh, this is what I’m talking about, this.”

Hachikuji made a loop with her thumb and forefinger.

Good!

A-OK!

If that wasn’t what she meant, she was making the sign for money.

“…?”

Well, I was pretty sure that’s what her sudden gesture meant, but I still

couldn’t figure out what she was getting at. I didn’t have any money (in either sense) coming to her…

Or did I need to cough up some dough to get her to talk with me? Did this grade-school girl operate like a hostess bar?

I needed to think twice about initiating a conversation with her?

“Uh oh,” she said, “a flat reaction.”

“No, I really don’t see what you’re getting at…”

“Ah, maybe I should put it this way then.” Hachikuji dropped her candid hand gesture, and assuming the proper posture, spoke with proper etiquette. “Congratulations on skipping out on your five-million-yen bill.”

“I didn’t skip out on it!”

Ah.

Got it—there we go.

I had told Hachikuji before about how I owed Oshino five million yen—told her about it, or consulted her about it.

Maybe it’s not the best idea to consult elementary school kids about your debts, but I wanted my relationship with Hachikuji to be one where I could talk to her about anything—and yet, I hadn’t shared how things had turned out.

In other words, I hadn’t found the chance to tell her that taking over an aberration-handling job from Oshino…or having the whole thing dumped in my lap happily resulted in the cancellation of my debt—I had to admit, having consulted her about it, I was amiss not to have informed her of the outcome.

But, believe it or not, Hachikuji’s take was that Oshino had left town without getting his money from me.

Quite the idiosyncratic interpretation.

And how far-fetched—did she really think I was the kind of guy who'd skip out on a debt?

"Listen good, Hachikuji. I'm a guy who pays his debts."

"Well… That's a good attitude, but it's pretty standard."

What a normal reaction, after all that.

"I mean, don't borrow money you can't repay, right?"

"Wrong, Hachikuji. Debt essentially makes the world go round. Individuals and corporations are all smothered in debt. Credit cards, loans, collateral, all of them involve borrowing money from someone and then working your ass off to pay it back. How much debt do you think Japan carries?"

"When you put it that way, sure… But then the world is a sad place, isn't it?"

"It's not sad. Because a debt is basically just a promise. There's the trust that in the future, sometime in the future, you'll pay it back from the money you earn. In other words, it's the future and promises and trust that make the world go round."

"You make it sound so good…"

"Mm-hmm."

In between the future and promises and trust are dire straits, filled to the brim with human misery, but that's a secret.

It had been my lot until the other day.

If you include that, I guess it's the future and promises and trust and secrets that make the world go round—by the by, Senjogahara also took care of the fee she owed Oshino.

Unlike me, she ultimately paid it off with cash, not work—or out of the

pocket money she received for helping her father out with his work, in lieu of a regular part-time gig.

I just kind of let it pass at the time, but exactly what sort of help do you perform to earn a hundred thousand yen in such a short time?

“Anyway, I took care of the money I owed Oshino. I’m squeaky clean, totally debt-free.”

“A filthy mind in a squeaky-clean body, huh?”

“Nope, not filthy, my mind is not filthy. I believe in Santa Claus and everything.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. He still brings me presents every year.”

“You still get presents from Santa Claus even though you’re in high school…”

“How do you like that, a squeaky-clean mind in a squeaky-clean body. The only other debt I have left is the three thousand yen I borrowed from my little sister.”

“Three thousand yen? Pay it back already, please.”

“It’s my personal policy not to return something that doesn’t need returning, even if it’s just an email.”

“No wonder you don’t have any friends…”

I thought you were a guy who pays his debts, Hachikuji lamented with an exaggerated sigh.

Now that she mentioned it, I did vaguely recall having said something of the sort, but my conversations with Hachikuji are mostly about the vibe, so please understand that something said on one page is forgotten by the bottom of

the next.

“I see,” she said. “Either way, glad to hear the money’s been paid back. Hmm, I’m a little disappointed.”

“Huh? Why? You’re disappointed about me paying Oshino back? Do you want me to be the kind of character who’s always up to his ears in debt? Are you after my land or something?”

“And exactly where is this land, Mister Araragi? No—look, you said it yourself at some point.”

“At some point? When?”

“When you were being stalked by your speedy junior. When you came to consult me—about owing Mister Oshino so much money and what to do about it. And while we were talking, you said something about how if you didn’t have the scratch, you might be able to give him a rare aberration tale or something in place of money—didn’t you?”

“Oh. I said all that?”

Well, I must have.

Back then, I was flustered because that “speedy junior” was stalking me, and to be honest my memory of the period is pretty unclear… But I do remember consulting Hachikuji about my debt, so it wouldn’t be surprising if I’d said all that.

Though I very much doubt I used the word “scratch”…

“In other words,” commented Hachikuji, “it would be like two CCG players exchanging rare cards.”

“Well, that childish analogy may be all very well for an elementary school student, but it’s somewhat divorced from reality…”

If we had to put it in terms of CCGs, it'd be like trading a rare card for cash, so her analogy wasn't particularly appropriate.

Nor was it something that kids should be doing at home.

"So ever since then, Mister Araragi, your humble servant has been keeping an eye out during her travels for any story that might fit the bill and be of help to you. 'Tales of aberrations' or 'ghost stories' or what have you."

"R-Really? Y-You've been doing that? For me?"

I was moved.

Moved by the friendship of Mayoi Hachikuji.

Who would have thought this girl in the prime of her cheekiness worried about my debts and tried to help me pay them back?

I had misjudged her.

I'd assumed she was just one more person who couldn't stand me… This fifth grader was a wonder.

"Such an industrious spouse!"

"That's a strange way to put it, Mister Araragi."

"Such an industrial space!"

"I wasn't planning on getting involved in factory production for your sake, Mister Araragi─but in any event, I've been conducting this secret activity on your behalf. Now that it's come to nothing, though, I'm kind of disappointed."

"Yeah…stands to reason."

"My disappointment is on par with the Three Great Disappointing Landmarks of Japan."

"It can't be that bad. And what the hell are you even talking about?"

"Famous landmarks that aren't as disappointing as you thought they would

be, which is itself a disappointment.”

Ah well, said Hachikuji.

“I went to all this trouble to find a story, but now my plan to sell it to you for an astronomical sum is ruined.”

“Plan?! Astronomical sum?! Y-You weren’t just going to give it to me?! It wasn’t a present for Mister Araragi?!”

“Not a chance,” she said, sounding vexed. “What ‘present for Mister Araragi’? Stick to getting your presents from Santa Claus, thank you very much. If I were to give you something, it’d be a presentation on how to be a stand-up guy.”

“A harsh one, I bet…”

Wait, this was vaguely terrifying, when I thought about it.

So basically, she’d been trying to sell me an aberration tale… If she’d been roaming the town since then on that mission, the girl’s obsession with money was not to be taken lightly.

On a mission? More like on commission.

No, maybe it wasn’t about the money. Had this girl just been looking forward to driving me even deeper into debt?

What a close call.

Good thing I got a handy job from Oshino before that could happen.

“Ouch,” she said, “seriously, I’m in a pickle here. I laid out a ton of money on spec for this. What am I going to do with this aberration tale I hunted down so I could flip it to you, Mister Araragi?”

“Don’t ask me.”

Here we were feeling the effects of Oshino’s disappearance. If he were still

in town, we could probably have gotten at least a little something for the aberration tale Hachikuji had found, even though I'd already paid him back what I owed. But with Oshino's Aberration Mart closed for business, there was no one in town who'd be interested in doing business around urban legends and the word on the street.

Hmmm.

Market speculation isn't a game for greenhorns… A cautionary tale.

"Mister Araragiiii, I won't ask for five million, just buy it pleeease. Go ahead, drive a hard bargaaain. Do you really want to make me feel like I've done all that work for nothing? For another obedient child to disappear from this world, replaced by a jaded kid?"

"I don't care if you're jaded or not. The second you tried to sell your friend a ghost story, you were already plenty jaded."

Although.

Her faux-nefarious, or flagrantly nefarious speech aside, it wasn't an out-and-out lie that Hachikuji had gone to some trouble on my behalf, so maybe I shouldn't let her feel like it was all a waste of time.

It'd be detrimental to her upbringing, sure, but if she internalized the lesson that "any more work I do on Mister Araragi's behalf will also be pointless," my prospects might also be somewhat dimmed.

This kid might come in handy for me somewhere down the line, so going easy on her right now might actually be a good move.

"Uh oh, are you concocting some devious scheme, Mister Araragi?"

"Excuse me? I'm just continuing to be moved by your friendship."

"You're certainly being moved for a long time… Got stuck on the *moved*

setting, huh. Are you emotionally unbalanced, Mister Araragi?”

“By the by, how much were you hoping to get for it, Ebenezer Hachikuji?”

“Fifty yen would be plenty.”

“That’s a steal!”

I was sure she’d try to haggle for more.

Maybe I was getting the friend discount?

“No, the story was never worth more than that in the first place.”

“You were trying to pass off a fifty-yen story on your friend for five million?!”

That’s not a friend, not even close!!

That’s a sucker!!

“Gimme a break, Hachikuji… We don’t want people thinking that conning me is as easy as taking candy from a baby.”

“Babies shouldn’t have any in the first place, they might choke.”

“Isn’t that sweet. The candy I mean, not you.”

I felt around in my pocket and took out a fifty-yen coin that happened to be there. If it had been a hundred-yen coin, I would’ve said keep the change, but tough luck, Mayoi Hachikuji.

“So, what’s the story? Let’s hear it.”

“Right. Um, it’s a story about sand.”

“Sand?”

“Right. Well sand or─oh, but before I get to that, may I ask you something?”

“Hm? What.”

“It’s about Mister Oshino taking off… Now that he’s left the cram school,

what’s become of this vampire I keep hearing rumors about? This newfound lost child, Miss Shinobu Oshino? I doubt Mister Oshino took her along with him…”

“Ah, well, she’s—”

I looked down at my shadow as I spoke.

My deep, dark, pitch-black shadow.

“Sorry, if I stay to hear your story, I’m already barely going to slip in under the bell as it is.”

I’ll tell you next time, I dodged.

Hachikuji had said “sand,” but more specifically it was a “sandbox”—the sandbox in a certain small park.

It wasn’t the same one where I’d first encountered Hachikuji. True, apart from parks where I’d played as a child, they all pretty much seemed the same to me. But unlike the one where I’d met Hachikuji, the one with the name I couldn’t read, the smallish grounds of this park were packed with a wide variety of playground equipment including a seesaw, a jungle gym, and monkey bars.

And of course, a sandbox.

It was at the bottom of the slide—though the slide was just a slide, and the sandbox was, in that sense, nothing but an ordinary sandbox, nothing strange or clever about its construction.

That only went for the design of this sandbox, however—there was definitely, as Hachikuji had said, something abnormal about the *sand.*

An abnormal phenomenon.

A bizarre phenomenon.

That may sound like an exaggeration—but if you’d suddenly been shown this in the middle of the night, if you’d witnessed it, I guarantee you’d be shaken up.

“Yeah, I was all shook up,” Hachikuji had said. “Or do I mean shook down.”

“Someone robbed you?”

“I shook it off.”

“You should’ve been shaking in your boots.”

Sandwiched though it’d been between our playful banter—Hachikuji’s explanation had been, largely, clear and comprehensible. She has yet to contract Senjogahara’s disease of feeling the need to attack me with literally every other word.

Though she’s bound to catch it before long…

Once they’ve taken hold, diseases like that are almost impossible to fully cure, so prevention is the key.

The first bell had already rung by the time she’d finished telling her story, but I’d managed to slip into the classroom before the final bell. After that I lived the life of the diligent student for six hours or so, and after *that,* on the way home from studying for finals at Senjogahara’s house, I headed to the park that Hachikuji had told me about.

It was nighttime.

The dead of night, you might say.

Hachikuji didn’t actually know the name of the park, and I didn’t see anything like a sign when I entered—still, as soon as I saw the sandbox in question, there was no longer any doubt in my mind that she’d meant this park. Like they say, seeing is believing.

It was obvious at a glance.

That this was the sandbox.

“Seeing is believing, but I can’t be leaving just yet…”

Despite the darkness, I had my vampiric sight, or its after-effects—and they were serving me well now. It was as if I’d been fitted with a high-res night vision scope.

As far as I could tell from looking through it—some kind of “picture” had been drawn on the surface.

Had been drawn, or.

Had emerged.

I don’t know, this might sound ironic, coming from someone who was only seeing it thanks to the after-effects of being a vampire—but it looked downright demonic.

A monstrous portrait.

As if the sand itself—were an aberration.

“What was it that Oshino said…the simulacrum phenomenon? How people can end up seeing human faces in anything…”

Sure, I got that.

But what about when it’s a demon’s face instead of a human’s? Well, okay, spirit photography, provided it’s not done with CG, is mostly some incidental combination of light and shadow, or haze, or dirt, which just ends up looking “that way”… Hachikuji had been walking around looking for a bizarre and mysterious phenomenon to sell me—and under those circumstances you might very well see something mysterious in the topography of a perfectly normal sandbox.

Perhaps, having heard her story, I had a preconceived notion of what I’d find—and ended up getting the same impression.

The stone statue back in April.

The bouquets back in May.

They’d been more or less like that—so it made sense to suspect this, too, was such a case. But only if Hachikuji and I had at least seen the sandbox on the

same day.

This wasn't a stone statue or a bouquet of flowers.

Each individual grain of sand may have solid form, but sand as a whole is a shifting mass—was it really possible for us to see the same "demonic face" on different days?

Not to mention sweet nothings written by lovers on the beach, basically all it takes is a gust of wind for sand to change its shape. That's why sandboxes are great places for kids to play.

Surely, in the almost half a month between when Hachikuji saw this demon "drawn" on the surface and today, when I came to check it out, a parade of kids had played in this sandbox.

Making mountains, tunneling through those mountains, digging holes…or perhaps calling on all the skill at their command to construct a castle.

Could a sandbox, having undergone all that—really display an identical aspect to me as it had to her? It meant that whatever changes had been wrought upon it, however much it had been moved around and turned over, the sand contained in this sandbox—shifted back into a demon.

A remonstrating monster.

As if the sand had—a will of its own.

"Was there any kind of sand aberration? The Sand-Throwing Hag? Though in that case the hag is the monster, not the sand…"

He wasn't a monster, but I did recall a relevant superman from the *Kinnikuman* manga called Sunshine—even so, I very much doubted this sand was about to take on human form and suddenly attack me.

And yet, I'd almost died twice at the hands of aberrations recently… The

mere thought set off alarm bells.

"…"

Well.

Having confirmed that the info Hachikuji sold me for fifty yen wasn't bogus, what now? Not that I came here just out of curiosity.

If there really was a threat, I couldn't just leave it alone, if for no other reason than that it was in a public park—it was the kind of thing that doesn't bother you if you don't know about it, but now that I did, I could spare at least a little time to look into it. Ridding myself of a bizarre worry simply by stopping by on my walk home from Senjogahara's for a few minutes would be a dream come true.

…Maybe not a dream come true.

Man, my vocabulary is pretty weak.

Anyway, unlike my disagreeable little sisters, I'm not the kind of person who goes around intentionally looking for trouble, but when trouble sideswipes me, I can't just let it be.

Such a dicey, or…

Enigmatic sandbox which, worst case scenario, might curse the children who play in it, was no laughing matter—if I were going to look into it, I'd better do it right away.

Though a high schooler playing in a sandbox in a deserted public park at a time that could be called "the dead of night" might seem even dodgier than an aberration.

"That said…it's probably just someone's idea of a prank. Someone like, for instance, a high schooler playing in a sandbox in a deserted park in the dead of

night.”

When I actually put it into words, this supposed prankster struck me as a pretty far-fetched character, but if you left out the high schooler part, it didn’t seem like an impossible explanation. In fact, it seemed pretty plausible. Drawing a face on the surface of the sandbox to scare away kids who were trying to play there…or no, maybe it wasn’t a prank.

Maybe it was the work of their so-called guardians.

Some parents don’t want their children playing in places like sandboxes, where their clothes and hands will get dirty. Maybe they made this “drawing” to keep their kids away from the sandbox, to scare them, to frighten them off… And even if they weren’t so high-strung, there was always the possibility that it was just a question of supervising the park at night.

Like how Naoetsu High put bouquets on the roofs—to keep people away… nope.

I promised Senjogahara I’d forget about that whole thing. I shouldn’t be remembering it here.

That aside, chances were this was a man-made phenomenon—not to parrot Oshino’s oft-stated frustration with everyone blaming aberrations every time something goes wrong, but when something does happen, it makes the most sense to accept whatever explanation seems to be, on the whole, most likely.

When something goes down, blaming humans rather than aberrations will yield a much higher success rate—though coming from someone who’s still saddled with the after-effects of having been a vampire, that sounds somehow supercilious, or weirdly pompous, or just unconvincing.

After all, ever since Hachikuji had told me, I’d harbored my fair share of

doubts about this “sand,” even before getting here.

“Now then…”

With that, I got into the sandbox. For a moment I debated taking off my shoes, but I’m pretty sure there’s no rule about having to go barefoot in the sandbox.

Mmmm.

My investigation had a serious goal, but my inner child couldn’t help being stimulated… Since the beginning of middle school—or even the last year of elementary school, boxes of sand have essentially only been for doing the long jump, not for playing.

This return to childhood made me want to try sliding down the slide into the sandbox, but that was taking the merrymaking too far.

I could think of excuses for investigating a sandbox, but it’d be a catastrophe if anyone saw me swooshing down into it.

Why were you doing that?! they’d ask.

It was an aberration, an aberration made me do it! I’d answer.

And in that case, it wouldn’t be the police station they would haul me off to…

“…Hm.”

I squatted in the center and gingerly scooped up some sand. The demonic face had gotten messed up the moment I set foot in the sandbox, but now I helped it along further.

I called it investigating, but I was destroying the object of study. Then again, I couldn’t hope to match Oshino’s armchair omniscience.

Carrying out any kind of Nondestructive Examination was off the table.

In detective novels, they always say that preserving the scene exactly as it was is fundamental to investigations, but a layman can't be expected to do it without disturbing things…

"Seems like normal sand. True, I'm no expert when it comes to sand…"

Ordinary sand from a sandbox in a public park.

In fact, thanks to me "playing in the sand" under the guise of an investigation, the "demonic face" or whatever had disappeared without a trace—and was failing, of course, to revert to its original form in an instant, or anything like that.

"…"

As a test, I formed a small mound.

I thought maybe if I played in the sandbox like a child, there'd be some sort of "reaction"—but there wasn't.

A shabby little mound of sand took shape, that's all.

After a minute or so lost in thought, I knocked it over and smoothed it back the way it had been. Then, brushing the sand off my hands, I stepped out of the sandbox—and once outside, I noticed that even though I hadn't played, er, investigated all that vigorously, my shoes were filled with sand.

Not just sand, anything made up of tiny grains will get in everywhere, no matter what you do… Taking off my shoes, I shook them one at a time, dumping the sand back into the sandbox.

Thanks to my vigorous trampling, it looked like an ordinary sandbox—but once I saw it in that state, I realized just how difficult it was to recreate that "demon."

Even making a little mound was harder than I thought—never mind making,

transforming, the whole sandbox into a face, demonic or otherwise. You needed to be able to grasp the whole sandbox as a canvas, or…

To put it simply, it required some modicum of painterly ability. Though I guess it was three-dimensional, so a sculptor-ly ability?

At any rate, it was an impossible task for a guy like me who couldn't even construct a decent shed. Perhaps one of the parents, or pranksters, who lived nearby had a flair for the fine arts…

Actually, was it done as an art project in the first place? Maybe it wasn't just here, maybe the sandboxes in all the parks, up to and including Unpronounceable Park, were inscribed with similar pieces of art. The sandbox would be an odd medium to choose, but that very transience might make it art—I didn't get that way of thinking, but I did get that it existed. About as well as I got writing sweet nothings amid the breakers at the seashore, at least…

Although it was night, I cast a shadow in the moonlight. I looked at that shadow—just a shadow, and muttered, "Well, if I can play in this sandbox without incident, vampiric after-effects and all—then it seems like there's no urgent issue here."

I couldn't help sounding like I was looking for reassurance. I knew perfectly well there'd be no reaction, but I just had to.

Even knowing there'd be no response, I'd continue addressing my shadow anyway.

"Honestly, it doesn't speak highly of whoever's doing it—whether it's a prank, or art, or a parent over-parenting, but I don't think I need to intervene, or interfere. It's not like I can get involved at the drop of a hat every time there's an aberration, so the work of a human being?"

With that, I put the park in my rearview mirror.

Calling it a mistake might be a little too hard on myself—but if there was a mistake I made here, it was assuming that if something wasn't the work of an aberration, it had to be a man-made phenomenon—and conversely, that if something wasn't a man-made phenomenon, it had to be the work of an aberration.

If this assumption had reached Oshino's ears—I'm sure he would've laughed it off, as always.

Though.

Who knows—maybe he would've scolded me.

“Tut!”

“…”

Oshino may or may not have scolded me, but Hanekawa did, unambiguously.

Tut!

I hadn’t been scolded in that way since kindergarten… It happened right after I got home from the park.

I got a phone call from Hanekawa.

Currently, not one but two model students, Senjogahara and Hanekawa, were helping me with my studies, which made me extremely lucky. Since Senjogahara had been on duty that day and our work had been successfully concluded, I had no idea why Hanekawa was calling me—but ignoring a call from my great benefactor was hardly an option, so I answered it.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Araragi? Sorry for calling so late—it’s just, something’s been on my mind. Is now an okay time?”

“Sure, now’s fine…”

Actually, I wanted to wash off the dirt from the sandbox, but I’m not enough of a clean freak to put off Hanekawa in favor of a shower.

“I just received Senjogahara’s regular report…”

“Regular report?! What the hell?!”

It sounded terrifying!

Wait, so, after our study sessions, Senjogahara reported to Hanekawa about how it went? A debriefing about whether or not I was studying properly?

Gaaah…

A serious lack of faith…

“Oh, no, this wasn’t for the Araragi Rehabilitation Program, it had more to do with the Senjogahara Rehabilitation Program─but forget about it.”

“Um, is that really a *forget about it* kind of an it?”

“In any case, I happened to catch that you were planning to investigate the sand at a certain park on your way home, Araragi… You finished with that? I tried to call when you’d be done.”

“…”

Her ears are a little too sharp, and her timing was dead on. And she doesn’t beat around the bush. If it were me, I would’ve waited until tomorrow─we’d see each other at school.

Frankly, I didn’t think it was worth telling Hanekawa─though I was perfectly willing to, if she wanted to hear about it.

I’m not Hachikuji, so I didn’t demand money for the story, of course. Compared to Hanekawa’s free tutoring, it barely amounted to anything.

I reported the findings of my sandbox investigation.

I didn’t embellish the story much, but I did leave out the reawakening of my inner child and my desire to slide down the slide. No harm done by a few small omissions.

Whether or not I left my inner child out of it, Hanekawa treated me very much like a little kid when she scolded:

“Tut!”

Scolded, or reprimanded, maybe.

What's she think I am?

"No good, Araragi."

"Huh? Sure, I know I'm no good, but you'd just come out and say so? Sugarcoat it."

"No, I wasn't saying 'no-good Araragi'—what you did was no good…"

Your persecution complex is in overdrive, she accused.

Sure, fair enough.

Though maybe it was more of an inferiority complex than a persecution complex.

"But what do you mean, what I did was no good? What's bothering you, anyway? You said you had something on your mind…"

"Yeah. I figured you'd take care of things, so I thought I'd settle for an after-action report."

"After-action report…"

Who the hell was she, receiving reports from Senjogahara, receiving reports from me.

Our commanding officer or something?

"Wait, then what did I do wrong? I'm pretty sure I did just about everything I could. I envisioned the worst-case scenario, and performed a scrupulous investigation, okay?"

"Mm-hmm, you sure did. Playing in the sand, building a mound."

"…"

I'd left that out of it…

Had something in my "report" tipped her off? Apparently, since she

sounded so sure of it.

Once again, talking to her is freaky.

I feel like she sees through me, though from a different angle than Oshino.

“Mm. Mmmm, you’ve overlooked something important, Araragi. You made an erroneous assumption.”

“Assumption?”

“You’re assuming the sandbox case has to be either the work of an aberration—or a man-made phenomenon. Correct?”

“Yeah, now that you mention, I guess I am, but…what, is there another possibility?”

Hanekawa hadn’t even seen the sand arranged in the shape of a demonic face with her own eyes, she’d only heard about it from Senjogahara, so how could she talk like she knew exactly what was going on—and Senjogahara had only heard an incredulous version of Hachikuji’s fifty-yen tale from me, before I’d even seen the real thing. As with the reawakening of my inner child—how could Hanekawa be so sure?

“There is. Another possibility. A third possibility.”

“Damn, there is? You really do know everything, don’t you?”

Ordinarily I say this line with a sense of admiration, but I can’t deny that just this once there was a little bit of irony mixed in there as well.

Despite my shameful pettiness, Hanekawa treated me to her usual response. “I don’t know everything, I just know what I know.”

This left me feeling utterly benign and coolheaded—which is no great feat, I have to admit. Hanekawa had me eating out of her hand.

Maybe it was thanks to the Rehabilitation Program or whatever.

“A third option… Neither the work of an aberration nor the work of a human being, so, um… Let’s see.” I thought it over inside my newly cooled head. It felt somehow like an extension of my exam prep. “Well, a process of elimination just leaves something like a natural phenomenon, I guess… Maybe the air flow in the park and the position of the slide are such that a face could form by happenstance…”

I said this exactly as it occurred to me, but even as I was saying it, I knew it was nonsense.

Or rather, the nature-as-culprit theory was pretty much the first one you’d consider, and just as quickly, dismiss—a crevice between two buildings was one thing, but no way the wind would be uniform in an open, unobstructed space like a park.

Even supposing the shape didn’t form all the time, Hachikuji and I had visited the park on totally random days—hard to believe the parameters just so happened to line up perfectly.

I’d only said it as conversation filler, and I girded my loins for Hanekawa’s cursory dismissal.

Perhaps another *Tut!*

Was I making a foolish remark on purpose, hoping for another one of those? I want to believe that I’m not that big of a fool—but if I was, my faint hopes were about to be dashed.

“Bingo, sounds like you’re on the right track, Araragi. No need for me to get involved, then.”

“Huh? No, hang on, you can’t just bail on me like that. Don’t back out now. It’s still your job to explain to me what that actually means.”

“Why’s it my job…”

“I mean, a natural phenomenon? The sand just happened to end up that way because of the wind or whatever? Impossible—”

Even as I spoke, I thought: *This is what they mean by “better left unsaid.”* Hanekawa not picking up on a problem, when I did? Maybe it’s just my inferiority complex talking again, but…

No, putting that aside.

Even if the “demonic form” were the result of a natural phenomenon, the most placid “solution” here, why would Hanekawa want to scold me for dismissing the possibility out of hand and making my assumption?

Could the Rehabilitation Program really be that strict? Was it a Spartan style of education that punished even the slightest moment of carelessness?

That was my fear, but it was misguided.

Because Hanekawa was quite justified in scolding me.

“Come on, Araragi. Wind and rain aren’t the only natural phenomena.”

“Huh?”

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

After that I returned to the park to confirm the “solution” Hanekawa suggested—and obviously, I mean this goes without saying, but her deduction was right on the money.

“Listen, Araragi. You keep saying that you checked out the sandbox—but it was just the sand you checked out, wasn’t it?” That’s what she said. “A sandbox—also includes the *container* the sand is in.”

The container?

Even after she said it, it didn’t click right away—and this usually ends up driven to the periphery of our thoughts on the subject, but of course, in order to keep it from mixing with the soil around it, the “sand” in a “sandbox,” unlike the sand on a beach, is surrounded by a container that is, for lack of a better analogy, like a swimming pool that’s been partially buried in the ground.

If you kept digging down into a sandbox, at some point you would reach the “bottom”—but a sandbox is surprisingly deep, so children sometimes believe that it’s bottomless or that it simply melds into the soil around them.

That’s how sandboxes are generally constructed, anyway, and once it’s pointed out—or once you think about it for a second, it all makes sense.

“So Araragi, if you’re investigating a sandbox but didn’t investigate the box itself, it doesn’t really count as investigating the sandbox. And—” Hanekawa’s tone became somewhat severe. “Sand is heavy.”

Even sand with nothing unusual about it.

That’s what she said—which is how I found myself at the sandbox in question, digging a hole with a shovel I’d brought.

Digging hurriedly, but cautiously.

And at last, after an excavation of about two feet, I reached the bottom.

Where—there was an enormous crack.

An enormous.

Crack.

“…”

Now it all made sense.

Because the bottom of the “sandbox” was ruptured, probably from a combination of age and the weight of the sand (as Hanekawa had pointed out), the surface settled into *that shape*—appeared to be the solution to the mystery.

Just as water conforms to the shape of a vessel, so too does sand—though it takes much longer and the process is less obvious than it is with water.

Which is why the sand didn’t “revert” immediately after children played there, or immediately after I kicked it all over the place in the course of my investigation—but it would “revert” over time.

Almost as if it had a will of its own.

Taking on a shape that reflected the topography of the bottom of its container.

And, as predicted, the demonic form was probably pure happenstance—thanks to the simulacrum phenomenon or what, I don’t know.

But it was just as Hanekawa said—the deterioration of the container, and the weight of the sand, being neither man-made nor aberration-related, were indeed natural phenomena, yet not at all placid ones.

The most placid solution, this was not—far from it.

Natural phenomena, though not wind and rain.

Up to this point, it's natural phenomena—and it would be natural phenomena *from here on out* as well.

As of now, those phenomena's effect was limited to a strange pattern appearing on the surface of the sand, but if the fissure in the container continued to grow, then the sandbox really might become bottomless—sand and earth mingling until they turned into quicksand, or to the point of liquification…not on a scale that would pose a problem for an adult, perhaps, but one that might prove fatal for any children playing in the sandbox.

Who might be swallowed up.

As if by a bottomless swamp.

Even if that was the worst-case scenario, playing in a sandbox whose container was broken was a dangerous thing to do—dangerous enough that at this point, it was a race against time.

Which is why Hanekawa had scolded me.

"So, for now…a call to the management company that oversees the park?"

No, it was probably the town that oversaw the park, not a private company… Well, if I contacted the all-knowing Hanekawa, she could tell me.

Then at last we'd be leaving this case behind.

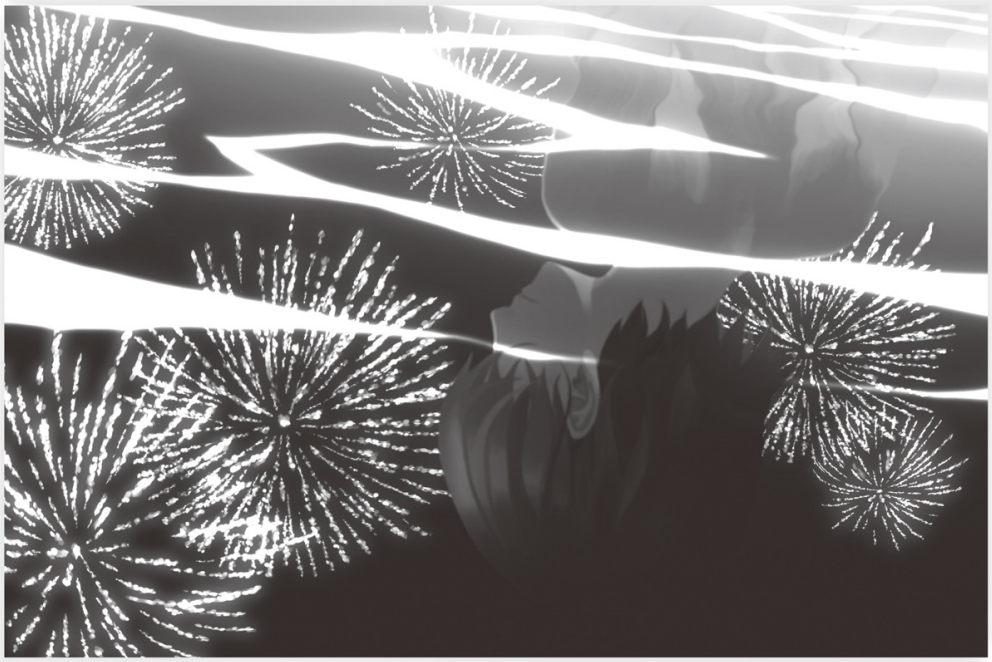
But seriously… I thought, looking at the hole I had dug. *Maybe that whole debate misses the mark. Aberrations are more frightening than human beings, human beings are more frightening than aberrations—that debate entirely missed the mark.*

More frightening and less placid than human agency or any aberration…is

nature.

As scary as a demon, as scary as people.

CHAPTER FOUR
KOYOMI WATER



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7
July

001

I bet Suruga Kanbaru thinks of a road as a place for running rather than walking—given that she runs full-tilt down whatever road she's on, no matter the circumstances, regardless of wind or weather. In fact, this junior of mine seems to have a hard time even slowing down, let alone proceeding at anything like a leisurely pace.

A hard time, yeah.

Hardly her forte.

But even though she's always hoofing it at top speed, maybe it's not so much that a fast pace is her specialty, especially, but rather that a slow pace is so difficult for her to maintain that it's out of her hands—though not so difficult that she's bound hand and foot.

In fact, Kanbaru, who has no qualms about embarking on a wild goose chase, probably never even considers taking a leisurely stroll—anyway, a road.

Not trod but raced down.

Ever since she became a star, garnering the attention of the entire school—and even now, having lost none of her luster even after quitting the basketball team, Kanbaru has been in possession of a roadmap depicting an altogether different route from my own.

"Hm. A road—isn't how I think of it, Araragi-senpai."

This was her response when I broached the subject one time. As always, she looked directly at me when she spoke.

"When running is a part of everyday life like it is for me, the place where

you run isn’t a road, it’s a track.”

A track?

Sure, that’s definitely what you’d call the “road” where the runners run in track-and-field—for a guy like me, though, whose everyday life does not involve running, for whom running is a big deal, calling it a “track” didn’t sit well.

How can I put this?

Doesn’t “track” strongly suggest an absolute, fixed route from which you can’t deviate?

“What? I’m surprised at you, Araragi-senpai. Even when it means ‘street,’ a road is still fixed, something you can’t deviate from. If you just up and move into the next lane, you’ll cause an accident. Changing lanes is never a simple matter, no matter what road you’re on.”

True.

“Street” or “track,” it’s merely a question of context, nothing more than semantics.

In practice, whether you’re running or walking.

Whether it’s a street or a track, a road is a road.

People talk about a life where “the roadmap is already laid out for you,” but since everyone is traveling down the road of life, we’re all following some set of rules.

Obeying some set of traffic regulations.

It’s not so easy to drop out of the race—to deviate from the fixed path. Changing lanes is all well and good, but you have to be careful, or you might drive straight off a cliff.

And there’s always the possibility of a head-on collision.

So we have no choice but to keep chugging along down the road.

“Well, that said,” qualified Kanbaru, “dropping out isn’t actually all that hard—the truth is, even if you don’t stray out of your lane, you can still drop out. Going full-tilt down the road, down the track, is certainly ‘chugging along,’ but it doesn’t necessarily mean you’re ‘moving forward’—people can ‘chug along backwards’ too.”

They can and do, she said.

“Because every route comes with an escape route.”

002

“Kanbaru. Hey, jackass, you haven’t been listening to a word I say.”

“What? Araragi-senpai, as your junior it makes my heart go pitter-pat to hear you call me ‘jackass,’ but it’s also upsetting to have such a charge leveled at me. The very idea that I, Suruga Kanbaru, hailed as the world’s greatest devotee of the world’s greatest Araragi-senpai, could possibly not listen to what he has to say is completely out of the question. A total fantasy. Get a grip, Araragi-senpai. Do you have any idea how much consternation you could cause with such careless remarks?”

“No remark of mine could cause the slightest consternation, even if I wanted it to. And no one’s hailing you for that, trust me. Listen, Kanbaru. Out of consideration for you as my junior, I’ll repeat what I said, since you were most definitely not listening. I’m gonna repeat after me.”

One day in July.

I was standing in a hallway of Kanbaru’s house—a Japanese-style home, which I was visiting on my day off. To be precise, I had no choice but to stand in the hallway, like I was being punished for arriving late to school.

Naturally I’d done no such thing; I’d shown up at her house on time, at the appointed hour.

I was forced to stand there because I simply couldn’t enter the room to which she’d led me—so to be precise, I wasn’t standing in the hallway so much as I was standing aghast in the hallway.

“All right, Kanbaru. Listen good.”

“I already am. I never miss a single word that comes from the wise lips of the great orator Araragi-senpai. My only fear is that I’ll become so overcome with emotion at what I hear that I’ll faint.”

“…I asked you to take me to your room.”

Choosing for the moment to ignore her tiresome habit of putting me on a pedestal, I pointed at the room—through the open sliding door, at the interior.

“I never asked you to take me to the storage.”

Messy.

Didn’t even begin to describe the room’s interior—to put it simply, it wasn’t just cluttered horizontally, but cluttered vertically. No, like I said, it was more than messy—it was chock full. The total chaos in the room wasn’t just a question of area, we’re taking about volume here…

“Storage? How rude. There are some things that even Araragi-senpai shouldn’t say.” Kanbaru grinned smugly. “Though that doesn’t happen to be one of them.”

“So you don’t mind having your room described that way…”

Well, to be honest, I did hold back in calling it the storage—my actual inclination was to call it a trash compactor.

I was starting to wonder if a place like the Kanbaru residence might actually have a trash compactor in it.

Or maybe it was more like a junkyard—piles of scrap metal towering menacingly overhead…

The room somehow seemed to be maintaining this precarious, not to say miraculous, state of balance, but if I impatiently stamped my foot, there might just be a teensy-weensy little avalanche out into the hall—where I therefore

continued to stand aghast, not moving a muscle.

“…”

Suruga Kanbaru.

My strange bond with the former ace of the Naoetsu High basketball team, a second-year, had begun at the end of May—she’d been cronies with Senjogahara back in middle school, which also helped bring us closer together.

Our relationship isn’t actually so simple that such a simple explanation could explain it, though—if I can expand on the subject a little without derailing the story, she also got involved with an aberration, same as me, or more than me—and the vestiges of that remain in her left arm.

Wrapped up in a bandage.

Hidden under a bandage.

That said, if you forget about all that stuff, or even if you don’t, at this point Suruga Kanbaru had become my darling junior. Though for someone with no redeeming qualities, a total washout like myself, to refer to a superstar athlete (even a retired one) as “darling” might be overstepping my bounds…

The superlative athlete part aside, however, she was also an undeniably debauched and undisciplined woman.

For example, as we’re seeing, Suruga Kanbaru “didn’t pick up after herself”—the unvarnished truth is that she was a “slob.”

A chaoslob.

The first time I was shown into her room, I looked to the heavens for strength and promised that I’d find a time to come back and do a thorough cleanup. It hadn’t been all that long ago, but now that I’d found that time and actually come to clean up, the room was in such a state that I couldn’t even see

the ceiling, let alone the heavens.

I'm no slouch when it comes to cleaning and organizing, in fact I can't relax unless things are nice and orderly, but to be honest, in this case I didn't even know where to begin.

I was frankly at a loss as to how to restore order to this storage of a room—the garbage bags I'd brought from home seemed laughably insufficient.

Ten 45-gallon bags.

What could I possibly accomplish with them? They'd be no use at all. What I needed wasn't garbage bags but cardboard boxes. Though if it was cardboard boxes I wanted, this storage seemed a likely enough place to find some…

"Keheheh. So, how will Araragi-senpai go about cleaning up this room? Show me what you've got."

"Get off your high horse."

"High? Not at all. More like subterranean."

"Terrifying. A voice from underground telling me to 'show me what you've got'… Sounds like the series is heading into a whole new stage. Listen, you knew I was coming to clean up, so you crammed your room full of all the trash from every other room in the house just to fuck with me, didn't you?"

One way to take care of the housekeeping, I guess.

Consolidate all the boxes and useless crap in one room, then clean all the other rooms one at a time. Seems kind of inefficient, like it'd end up requiring twice as much effort, but it would lower the difficulty level of the actual cleaning.

"What a thing to say, Araragi-senpai. Now you're just showering me with accusations. Though I'm overjoyed to be showered with anything by you, be it

praise.”

“I’d feel so stupid praising such a girl…”

“This is the only room I’ve got. I’m not the kind of spoiled rich kid who’s always been allowed multiple rooms. This is my one and only room.”

“Yeah? Well, thank god for small favors.”

“Yup. Just as Araragi-senpai is my one and only senpai.”

“That’s a lot of pressure!”

What about Senjogahara!

How can you call someone you only met a couple of months ago your only senpai in the world? I haven’t done anything to deserve that from you, and I probably never will.

“Wait a minute, though…I mean, it doesn’t make sense. With your room like this, where the hell do you sleep?”

“Here in my room, where else?” Kanbaru cocked her head, puzzled. “The only places I would lay my head are this room, Senjogahara-senpai’s lap, and your outstretched arm, Araragi-senpai.”

“I don’t know about Senjogahara’s lap, but my arm’s no pillow, and this room seems like a no-go too… You can’t even get inside, can you?”

“An amateur like yourself might think so,” Kanbaru casually insulted her honored senpai—I’d love to learn to be so insensitive, even if it’s from my junior.

Well, if she wanted to call me an amateur, I’d ask her to spell it out for me. I’m certainly not an expert—in anything.

“Okay then, let’s hear it. How do you manage to sleep in this room?”

The renowned polymath and genius Leonardo da Vinci is said to have slept standing up—shocking if true, but did Kanbaru do something along those lines?

She was something of a genius when it came to sports, at least…and yet, it seemed impossible for anyone, even a genius, to so much as stand up in that room, let alone sleep…

“Heheheh. Now I’ve seen everything, Araragi-senpai. I never expected to live long enough to see the day when I could be the one to teach *you* something.”

“You’re only seventeen, plus we haven’t even known each other for a hundred days…”

She was already seeing the day, more like.

“Now quit putting on airs and tell me already. How do you sleep? If the punch line is that you sleep in the hall, I’m gonna kick your ass.”

“I wish that *was* the punch line. Boy, I’d love to get my ass kicked by you. I’d love to get a hall-slam instead of a wall-slam from you.”

“What’s a hall-slam?”

I mean, I get slamming your hand against a wall, like in a rom-com…

Geez.

We’d been talking all this time, and I still hadn’t set foot inside Kanbaru’s room.

We’re going to run out of tape before the intro’s even over.

“Are we talking about breakfast at Denny’s or something? A fluffy, buttermilk hall with two eggs, sausage *and* bacon on the side?”

“Hm. Well, anything’s possible, I guess there could be a hallway you’d want to slather with maple syrup, but… Let’s see, you were asking how I sleep, right? Okay, Araragi-senpai. Please, look. See that opening over there?”

Kanbaru pointed into her room.

Sure enough, there was an opening, or a cave dug out of the sheer cliff

face…a kind of air pocket, I guess you might say, created by the precarious balance of the piled boxes.

“Sure, but what about it? You can’t possibly be telling me that you sleep in that crevice like a mole or something.”

“Oh, but I can. If I get a running start in the hallway and do a Fosbury flop, I can get myself in there.”

Kanbaru puffed out her chest like she was proud. Arching her back like she was doing a Fosbury flop… But leaping backwards into a place like that rather than a mattress or a sandbox could cause the kind of grievous injury that would require immediate medical attention…

No need to bend over backwards just to sleep in your room.

If it’s that much of a pain in the ass, sleep in the hall.

“No, no, Araragi-senpai. The speed with which you come to conclusions is one of your many virtues, but it does sometimes invite lapses in judgment.”

“I don’t need any friendly advice from you, Kanbaru. My only lapse in judgment was agreeing to clean up this room. Well? So it’s comfy, your little cave?”

“It’s comfy.”

“Even if you don’t hurt yourself, it doesn’t seem like a pleasant place to sleep. Seems like your body’d be stiff as all hell by the time you woke up. You may not know this, Kanbaru, but sleeping is a biological necessity whose general purpose is to rest the mind and body.”

“I know that. Sure, it may not be the most cushiony place to sleep, but it fits me perfectly, like a sleeping bag, so it’s surprisingly comfy.”

“Really…”

“It can’t compare with Senjogahara-senpai’s lap, of course, but it’s certainly comfier than your arm.”

“Hold on just a second there! First let me state unambiguously that I’ve never once offered you my arm as a pillow, before retorting that being told a mountain of garbage is more comfortable than my arm is beyond dismaying!”

“Boy, you’re rolling up your sleeves to yell at me? No need to get so up in arms over an arm pillow.”

“Wipe that smile off your face and quit talking nonsense!”

To begin with, I hadn’t rolled up my sleeves.

I was wearing short sleeves. It was July, the middle of summer. There was nothing to roll up in the first place.

“Well, I may have slightly overstated the case.”

“You’ve never not overstated the case. Everything you say is an exaggeration. So? What case specifically did you overstate?”

“It’s true that a mountain of garbage is more comfortable than your arm, but…”

“…”

She wasn’t retracting that part.

She also admitted it was a mountain of garbage…

“But that comfort is a double-edged sword. Since that cave fits my body so perfectly, there isn’t room for someone else to share it with me,” Kanbaru said achingly.

Aching in both senses.

“If only you could sleep beside me in my cave, Araragi-senpai, it would outstrip Senjogahara-senpai’s lap—the perfect bed, perfected at last!”

“Take it down a notch!”

“I should have pointed this out sooner, but as you said earlier sleeping is a biological necessity undertaken to rest the mind and body, and in terms of physical needs, ‘sleeping’—”

“Dirty jokes prohibited!”

The banter had run its course.

Having bided my time, I girded my loins, so to speak, and finally turned my hand to cleaning Suruga Kanbaru’s room.

Upon reflection, I had in fact done some light organization the first time I visited Kanbaru's room—if I hadn't, there wouldn't even have been anywhere to step.

That time, it felt like it'd be dangerous to go barefoot in there—like a minefield. Whether it's rooms or thought processes, I know I'm more of a neat freak than most boys, but any human being confronted by that room would've been moved to do something about it.

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that I underestimated the situation and assumed today's task wouldn't be so hard, having completed the preliminary preparations a couple of months ago.

If Kanbaru was neither fucking with me nor testing my mettle, then a certain lassitude born of the expectation that "Araragi-senpai will clean it up for me" was probably to blame for the fact that her room had ended up in this ignominious state in barely over a month.

And so as her senpai, as a senpai who should provide guidance to his juniors, the ethical and moral choice may have been to turn right back around and go home without lifting a finger to clean her room. But that's life for you, we all make mistakes.

It's a lot harder to stop doing something than it is to start.

I didn't want to disappoint Kanbaru, but more importantly, I couldn't let her go on living in a little cavern inside a mountain of trash. Also, her room's initial overwhelming state simply stimulated my desire to clean up, just as it had the month before last.

While I had recoiled in horror, if I turned tail, Koyomi Araragi's name would be mud.

The cleanup took hours—it's no exaggeration that I started around noon, and night had fallen by the time I was finished. Ultimately, though, I did manage to clear out some breathing room.

"Frankly, I think some well-placed explosives might've been quicker…"

"Hahaha," Kanbaru laughed cheerfully. "Hold off on the explosives, please. The house is made of wood, the whole thing'd be blown to bits."

What's so goddamn funny?

Just FYI, she didn't help out with the cleanup one bit—only the bare minimum, telling me what was trash and what wasn't from the sidelines.

Anyone observing us during those hours would've been convinced that she was the senpai—and that a junior had come over to help her move.

Compelled to do so under great duress.

"I'm pretty sure your grandparents would happily give me permission to carry out a bombing raid to get this mess cleaned up."

"You just don't get it. You have no idea how precious those books are."

"They're the first to go."

First or not, it was a holiday so there was no trash pickup. All I could do was tie up all the unwanted crap with string or whatever and leave it in the courtyard—nothing to do but pray that it didn't rain before trash day.

I wonder if I should help take out their trash as well…though maybe that was over the line, don't want to get *too* involved in another family's affairs.

"Anyway…good work, Kanbaru," I said.

To be honest, I was the only one who'd done any work at all, be it good or

bad, but I couldn't come up with anything else. "We did it!" didn't seem quite right either…

And if I'm being generous, I can see how watching someone else clean up for that long might constitute work in its own way.

Me, I hate it when someone else cleans my room…but with Kanbaru, who knows. Maybe she loved every minute of it.

I really don't get this girl's character at all.

Seriously, what's her deal?

"Okay, I'm headed home. It's already completely dark out—no need to overstay my welcome."

"Hold it right there, Araragi-senpai, young man."

"I'm sorry, but that's just not the kind of thing you say to your senpai."

She speaks in such a robust and cheerful manner that it's hard to tell, but apart from calling me her dear senior, she doesn't have time for actual polite speech.

"Do you really think I'd let an esteemed senpai just clean my room and go home, especially when that senpai is you, finest of them all?"

"'Let'? Exactly what are you planning to do to me?!"

"Why be so alarmed…"

What do you take me for, Kanbaru said, pouting.

Why be pouting?

She'd given me plenty of reason to be alarmed.

"I just wanted to serve you some tea. Uh-uh, tea won't cut it. A little supper, Araragi-senpai."

"Supper? Oh, you mean dinner? No, I'm fine. I'm pretty sure they've got

dinner waiting for me at home.”

“I can’t allow that. You’re not permitted to be fine.”

“Wha? I can’t be fine without someone’s permission? My junior’s?”

“Understand that until you’ve eaten my grandmother’s home-cooked supper, you won’t be leaving this mansion.”

“Is that a threat?”

And what the hell, her grandmother’s home cooking?

A little supper, she says, but she’s not even going to make it herself… though any way you slice it, Kanbaru doesn’t seem like the type to be any good at cooking.

Her grandmother made the lunch she gave me that other time, too.

While cooking and cleaning may both come under the heading of housework, they are not, of course, directly linked. Still, someone skilled at cooking would, at the very least, be unable to remain impassive in the face of a room in such a disastrous state.

They say the kitchen is the baseline for household mess, and once that starts to go, it’s all over…

“Heh. Or will you try and force your way out? Go ahead, try it. I wonder, though, do you have the agility to best me?”

Kanbaru spread her arms wide and stood on the threshold.

As if she was taking a defensive stance in a basketball game—clueless about proper etiquette in a traditional Japanese home. Didn’t she know it was rude to stand there?

“Come on, come at me. I may be retired, but my defense hasn’t gotten so lax that I’ll let an amateur like you get by me.”

“Um, I’m not coming at anyone, okay?”

And you know, for someone who respects me, she seems a bit too committed to calling me an amateur.

It would’ve been one thing if I were vampiricized from giving Shinobu some of my blood, but since I wasn’t, I didn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of breaking through her defense.

Seemed like my only option was to go along quietly.

Well, I wouldn’t be much of a senpai if I brushed off the kindness…or the gratitude of my junior.

To be honest, having consistently refused to participate in clubs or sports since middle school, I was unaccustomed to the very experience of being treated like a senpai and didn’t know how you acted like one in the first place… I couldn’t gauge the distance between us very well.

I guess I’d ask Senjogahara next time I saw her.

Was it okay to spend my entire day off cleaning my junior’s room, and then to get treated to dinner by way of thanks? Or was that a no-go?

That one doted on Kanbaru like a pet cat, though. I might not get a straight answer…

“Okay, okay. You win, Kanbaru, you got me. I give up.”

“You can’t throw in the towel yet. You’ve still got an opening, this is no time to give up.”

“Just what exactly do you want me to do?”

“Grapple with me.”

“I thought you were on the basketball team, not the sumo team…”

If I lost a sumo bout to a girl, and to my junior no less, my name really

would be mud. So taking her pep talk, with due respect, as just that, talk—

“I’ll stay for dinner, then,” I relented. “I just need to call my folks.”

“Hm, if that’s how you feel, I suppose I have no objection,” answered Kanbaru, sounding strangely magnanimous.

She hadn’t gotten to grapple with me but seemed pleased that everything had, on the whole, gone according to her wishes—and if my junior’s day off had been a satisfying one, well then I couldn’t be happier.

Let’s leave it at that.

“Now then, Araragi-senpai. Before you take your seat at the supper table.”

“Hm?”

“Go take a bath. You can’t show up to our dining room like that, you look filthy.”

Even I know that you don't call the place where you eat in a traditional Japanese home a "dining room," but since I have no earthly idea what you do call it, I decided to refrain from pointing that out.

And, regardless of the nature of our relationship, Kanbaru was absolutely right that it would be bad manners to show up at dinner completely covered in dust from a day of intensive cleaning, so I was actually grateful that she'd said something.

I had very nearly behaved most indelicately in someone else's home—but at the same time, I would never have conceived of using the bath at that someone's home, so you can imagine my consternation as I sat there in the tub.

Consternation, or…

A feeling of immorality, maybe?

I felt like I was transgressing some deep-seated taboo… It was a cypress bath, I think, a splendid bath commensurate with their splendid home. The bathroom was big enough that it wouldn't have been out of place in a modest inn, and getting to take a bath in there felt like more than ample repayment for the day's hard work.

"…"

But it still felt odd.

Submerged up to my neck, enjoying a relaxing soak at the home of a junior I didn't know *that* well…

Even Senjogahara, whose sensibilities were a little off, would opt for "not"

if I asked her whether or not this was okay.

Though if I actually brought it up she'd probably kill me.

Death by office supply.

Rubbed out by an erasable ballpoint pen—though I wasn't sure exactly how that would work.

I took a look at the waterproof clock, which was somewhat incongruous with the cypress bath—or conversely, which served as a reminder that this was a private home and not an inn. I wasn't so much worried about the hour as I was pondering how long I had until this "supper."

It seemed like Kanbaru hadn't planned to host a dinner party for me, she'd just hit on the idea in the moment and gotten her grandmother's permission after the fact.

It must've been a real hassle for her grandmother to suddenly be making dinner for me as well—I'm sure she thought I was an overweening senpai—but she must be a kindhearted woman because she apparently gave the okay.

I'm very grateful. That is, terribly sorry.

"…Dammit, I can't relax."

There was plenty of room to stretch out, the water was the perfect temperature, that was all great. I have no intention of retracting my earlier statement that this was more than ample repayment for my hard work. When it comes to someone else's shampoo and conditioner and soap, however, I can't relax.

Man, am I uptight.

Well.

I'll get out as soon as I'm all warmed up, I told myself, but that was when a

sound came from the changing room.

A sound, by which I mean a voice.

“Hm?! What’s this?! The door won’t open?! It’s locked?! What’s going on, Araragi-senpai, are you all right?! I’ll save you!!”

“…”

Someone was frantically rattling the door handle─a hoodlum was attempting to break into the changing room.

“Open this door! Come out with your hands up! This is your last warning!”

“…”

Or maybe it was the police?

“I am Suruga Kanbaru, Araragi-senpai’s sex slave! My signature move is the triangle jump!”

“…”

Nope, a hoodlum.

“Why won’t this open? I guess I’ve got no choice, I’ll be back in a sec with that stick the S.W.A.T. team uses for breaking down doors!”

“Enough already! And don’t bring something if you don’t even know what it’s called!”

Though.

It’s not like I know either.

“Oh, what’s this, you’re unharmed, Araragi-senpai…”

After my retort the violent banging finally ceased. She sounded sincerely concerned for my wellbeing─though that doesn’t excuse her initial attempt to break into the changing room.

I’d shouted from inside the bath; my voice as it echoed off the walls was

kind of unsettling, but I needed to talk loud enough for my voice to reach her through two doors, across the changing room.

For her part, Kanbaru always spoke in a voice that was plenty loud enough to carry that far.

“You gave me quite a scare, Araragi-senpai… I was really worried you were being held captive in there.”

“You’re pretty much the only person in the world who’d hold me captive.”

“I don’t think so. There’s always Senjogahara-senpai.”

“Hahaha, not a chance. Whatever else she might do, Senjogahara wouldn’t go that far.”

“But, how come the door won’t open?”

“Because I locked it, obviously.”

She acted surprised, or maybe she really was surprised, but Kanbaru barging in while you were in the bath was a probable scenario for anyone who knew her.

Locking the door was a natural precaution.

“Locked… There’s a lock on the changing-room door?”

Kanbaru seemed genuinely taken aback.

It’s your house, how can you not know that?

“I mean, when I take baths, I just leave the changing-room door open…”

“That’s leaving yourself a little too open, don’t you think? Though it’s fundamentally up to you how you want to behave in your own home.”

That is.

I was the one who was buck-naked in someone else’s home, even if I was in the bath.

“There seems to be some sort of misunderstanding here, Araragi-senpai, so allow me to clear it up. I only came because I wanted to get into the bath with you.”

“Nope, no misunderstanding. Nothing to clear up.”

“I misspoke. I only wanted to wash your clothes for you while you were in the bath, Araragi-senpai. My conscience is clean.”

“…”

Her conscience could use a bath.

And even if she was telling the truth, I had a hard time believing that the person who was responsible for the room that had made my clothes so filthy was any good at doing laundry… She could very well be even worse at it than cooking.

“What? I’m a jock, I’ve been playing sports my whole life, so I’ve always done tons of laundry. You might even call it my forte.”

“Mm…that’s a fair point. Still, if you wash my clothes I won’t have anything to wear.”

“Just come out naked then, it’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. I don’t have that much confidence in my body.”

“If you like, in addition to your clothes, I can wash your body for you. From in front and behind!”

“…”

The sound-only aspect really amplified this girl’s perviness. And the fact that I was buck-naked only served to double my, what would you call it, visceral sense of impending danger.

“I’m saying that in return for cleaning my room, I want to clean your body,

Araragi-senpai!”

“You should worry about getting your mind clean first. How can it be so filthy when you’re using such a great bath every day?”

“Heheh. Well, I can’t deny that it’s a great bath. I’m sure it’d just be off-putting if I pretended to be humble about it.”

She only hears the positive parts.

I could see her proud smile in my mind’s eye.

Then again, it was definitely a bath to be proud of…

“It’s not just the bath, though, the water itself is great too, isn’t it? We pass the water up from the well in the garden and then heat it. It may not be from a natural hot spring, but it’s deepsomething water full of somethingium.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean… If you’re so proud of it, at least learn the proper terms.”

Was it like mineral water or something?

Well water isn’t necessarily mineral water─but oddly enough, once she’d said that, I started to feel like the water filling the cypress tub really was special.

Hmmm.

Well water, huh?

“Oh, speaking of which, Araragi-senpai.”

“What is it, Kanbaru-kohai?”

“That water has something of a past, you know?”

“Something overcast? Listen, you’re the only thing around here that’s dreary.”

“Not something overcast, something of a past.”

“Oh yeah?”

Well, either way, she really was something—but well water with “something of a past”? What was that supposed to mean? Sure, it passes up the well, but what past?

“What kind of a past are we talking about?”

“My, my, interested are we?”

“I don’t know about interested…”

When someone brings up something like that, how else do you respond? Though if there was a story behind the water I was currently immersed in, I certainly wanted to hear it.

Purely out of curiosity.

“Okay, fine, I’m interested in this so-called past. Why not? And by the way, right now you’re being something of a pest.”

“It’s a story about my father.”

“Wow, your fath…”

Er.

Kanbaru threw it into the conversation so naturally that I almost didn’t think anything of it, but her father, yeah, passed away many years ago—not just her father, but her mother too, together.

In a—car accident.

Which is why Kanbaru lives with her grandparents. Their only son was Kanbaru’s father.

“…”

“Naturally, my father bathed in that bath—not just the bath, but the well water too—daily.”

Not knowing how to respond to this, I fell silent, but Kanbaru just went on

telling me this story about her father from the far side of two intervening doors.

She must've accepted his passing as a fact of life by now—in which case handling the subject with kid gloves might be rude, or from Kanbaru's perspective, vexing.

Which is why I responded, "Hmm… Daily, huh?"

"Yup. Since he used it all the time, I guess my father didn't treat the water as anything to be particularly grateful for…"

"Well, stands to reason…"

As someone who lives in a regular house, I was jealous that they had a well at all—or at least, I thought it was cool. But if you had one in your yard your whole life, of course you wouldn't be grateful. It's just there.

"But from the time he was a little kid—once in a blue moon, something caught his attention while he was taking a bath."

"Caught his attention?"

"A certain phenomenon—might be a better way to put it."

Not quite aberration-related, but a mysterious phenomenon, Kanbaru elaborated.

"Not quite aberration-level—but mysterious? That's awfully, or very, specific."

I tensed up somewhat in the tub.

I mean, if the well water involved an aberration in some way, that could spell big trouble—even apart from the fact that I was personally submerged in it at that very moment, using water with that kind of a past on a daily basis didn't seem like a great idea.

"I'm telling you, Araragi-senpai—it's not aberration-related. It doesn't

involve aberrations.”

“Right…”

Non-aberration-related, aberration-unrelated?

A mysterious phenomenon that doesn’t involve aberrations? Actually, I guess they’re a dime a dozen.

Man-made phenomena.

Or natural phenomena.

Such things were eminently possible—the question was how dangerous they might be.

In other words, just because it wasn’t aberration-related didn’t guarantee that this thing Kanbaru was telling me about was safe.

“Sure, but the monkey aberration that you wished on was left to you by your parents, so—no, was it just your mother?”

“Yup, it was my mother. Your memory is remarkable, Araragi-senpai, not that I’m surprised.”

“Being complimented after I had to correct myself just makes me feel shitty, actually…”

“Back in the day, I thought ‘remark’ meant ‘mark again.’”

“Truly remarkable.”

Toé Gaen.

I think that was it, or that’s how my decidedly unremarkable memory remembers it—Suruga Kanbaru’s deceased mother’s name.

I don’t think she ever told me her father’s name…and now seemed like an awkward time to be asking her.

“So, what was this mysterious phenomenon that didn’t involve any

aberration? What are we dealing with here, Kanbaru? Depending on your answer, I might need to get out of this bath sooner rather than later…”

“No need to be on edge, Araragi-senpai. Don’t worry, it’s not a scary story. It’s not a ghost story or anything.”

“Not a ghost story─”

Hearing that didn’t put my mind at ease.

I still had the lingering influence of an aberration in my body, after all─supposing, and I know this might seem like a wild thought, but supposing the well was filled with holy water or something, my body might just melt.

But Kanbaru also had an aberration lingering in her body, so if she could bathe without incident then there was nothing to worry about─except she’s a raging masochist, and she might enjoy the pain from her body melting a little bit.

“…”

What a caveat: *except she’s a raging masochist.*

One hell of an aberration.

Truly abnormal and irrational.

Able to be doubted again.

“Sure, if you want to get out, I won’t stop you. And if you want to come out of the changing room naked, I won’t stop you either.”

“Do stop me.”

“But first, Araragi-senpai, I want you to look at the surface of the water you’re in.”

“?”

I didn’t know what she was up to, but I reflexively did as Kanbaru said─not that I had to do much, since most of my body was immersed and the water was

already taking up most of my field of vision.

“I looked. It’s a little late to be asking this, but…what’s up with the water?”

“It’s not the water.”

“Huh? What is it, then? I guess for baths you call it *oyu* instead of water, but—”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant. Look, I already told you, it’s not the water that I want you to look at.”

It’s the surface of the water, she reminded me.

The surface?

This little tidbit shocked me when I first heard it—but apparently the concept of “oyu” doesn’t exist in English. Or rather, there isn’t a separate word for it—the distinction between “oyu” and water is expressed as “hot water” and “cold water,” and they’re basically treated as the same thing.

It’s inconceivable to me as someone raised in Japan not to have a distinct word for “oyu,” but from a foreign perspective maybe the ambiguity of our word for water—“mizu”—is itself troubling. We make a distinction between “oyu” and “mizu,” but at the same time “oyu” *is* “mizu”—and while “mizu” refers to H_2O, it can also refer to liquids in general.

No, forget about troubling, when you really think about it, that’s downright disturbing.

Anyway—Mademoiselle Hitagi Senjogahara, who shared that disturbing truth with me, also told me to *Drop dead.*

“Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead.”

“…”

Eek.

She’s terrifying whether it’s sound-only or the full sensory experience… She starts out cranked to the max, so it doesn’t make much of a difference anyway.

I very nearly dropped my cell phone but somehow hung on and said, “I-I can’t die yet. We’ve only just fallen for each other. We’ve only just started going out. I want to go on so many more dates with you. It would be too painful to let

go of life at this point.”

“Well now. That’s a very nice thing to say. Fine, you don’t have to die yet.”

“…”

You’re too soft, Miss Senjogahara.

Tell me to drop dead at least a couple more times.

Actually, she could quit being so open about her murderous desires if she was just going to back off at the drop of a hat—but whatever.

“In any case,” I returned to the topic at hand, “I ended up going over to Kanbaru’s today to clean up.”

Ultimately I got out of the bath and partook of Kanbaru’s reward, namely the supper party that she held for me. By the time we were done eating it was quite late, and they were about to lay out a bed for me, but on that, at least, I held firm—and somehow made it home before the clock struck midnight.

I got a lecture from my little sisters for staying out so late.

Usually when they lecture me it unfolds into a bloody civil war, but luckily for them I was too tired this time.

The bath had done a fair job of washing away the fatigue of cleaning Kanbaru’s room, but I was worn out from the tension of the supper that followed.

So ignoring my little sisters, I headed to my room—intending to fall asleep right away.

When I went to plug in my cell phone, however, I saw that I’d gotten an email and not noticed. An email from Senjogahara.

I could ignore my sisters, but not an email from her. Because she’s scary—partly, but we’ve been going out since the month before last, so even if

she weren't, I wouldn't just ignore her.

Given the time, I figured it was a good-night message, but judging from the subject line "I hear you were in Kanbaru's room," it had more to do with surveillance.

There was nothing in the body.

Even the way she used email was scary…

Maybe it was a good-night-forever message.

And so I ended up calling Senjogahara and giving a detailed report of the day's activities—faithfully and accurately.

It'd be terrifying if I got caught in a lie, and there was a dreadfully open line of communication through the mental hotline that connected the newly reborn Valhalla Duo, so any lie would most definitely be detected. In that sense maybe they should've been called the Valhalie-Duotector.

I was thoroughly whipped.

No, forget about whipped, I was downtrodden. They were walking all over me—Kanbaru treated me as a headrest, and Senjogahara treated me as a doormat. I didn't have one iota of dignity left.

I oughta left my dignity in a safe-deposit box.

I wanted to ask Hanekawa to save me, but if Senjogahara was monitoring me, Hanekawa was supervising me; if she wasn't already riding to the rescue, then she had no intention of saving me this time, whether I asked her to or not.

While I hadn't told Senjogahara that I was going to Kanbaru's house to clean (hence Kanbaru's report to her), I had duly informed Hanekawa in advance—yikes…

Seriously, what the hell has happened to my life?

Zero free will.

I have to wonder, my decision to buckle down and study so that I could go to the same college as Senjogahara—was it really my own?

“Going to clean your junior’s room for her… Well, aren’t you the helpful one, Araragi—taking a bath though, that’s over the line. I think you really ought to drop dead.”

“Don’t think that.”

“It’s better than thinking ‘I’m going to kill you,’ isn’t it?”

“…”

Sure, but.

“So, Araragi. What did you make of Kanbaru’s story?”

“Hm?”

“The story—*not the water, look at the surface*, that one.”

“Oh, right…” I nodded.

My intention was to tell her what had happened faithfully and accurately, so I included the story as well, but not said anything about what I made of it.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s definitely a weird story. Or maybe not weird? I guess I should call it a romantic story—since Kanbaru’s father saw *the face of his future wife* on the surface.”

That was the story.

From the time he was little, Kanbaru’s father had seen the figure of an unfamiliar woman when he bathed in that cypress tub—not always, mind you, only occasionally, but either way, the woman with whom he’d elope one day was reflected for him there on the surface.

He didn’t pay it much mind since it was clearly some sort of illusion, and at

some point he stopped seeing it. What, if anything, the illusion meant kept on tugging at some corner of his mind, however—so he had quite a shock the first time he laid eyes on Kanbaru's mother, on Toé Gaen, in other words.

Almost as if.

They'd been destined to meet.

"Sounds like the kind of charm girls would be into," I said. "Wasn't there one like that, where you'd fill the sink with water, and it would reflect the face of your future husband or something?"

The story was about Kanbaru's dad, so instead of a girl I ended up picturing a man in the prime of life, but the story took place when he was a kid, plus, they got married quite young, so it didn't feel that off.

Romantic.

You could call it that, sure.

From the smattering of knowledge I'd acquired as a high school student just dipping his toes into the world of exam prep, a liquid surface could function as a sort of screen… But in that case, seeing his "soul mate," or even just "the face of someone he'd meet in the future," was pretty crazy.

This wasn't like the sandbox.

Water is, of course, even more protean than sand—and while the cypress tub may have been an antique, there was of course nothing funny going on with the bottom of it.

"Hm," said Senjogahara. "So when you looked at the surface of the water like Kanbaru asked, who did you see reflected there? Me? Or me? Or was it me?"

"Ugh!"

“Hanekawa? Kanbaru? Li’l Hachikuji?”

“You’re scaring me!”

I was quaking with fear.

“I didn’t see anyone… The only thing I saw was a normal reflection of my own face.”

“Wha? Are you trying to tell me that your soul mate is your precious self?”

“Oh shut up. What do you mean, my precious self?”

She always maintained such a level tone, why was this the only time she managed to sound properly surprised?

“There was a story like that, wasn’t there? A myth where a guy was so enamored of his own reflection that he drowned himself… What was it again?”

“You know perfectly well. You’re just trying to get me to say that I’m a narcissist.”

“Here’s another story. Once there was a dog that was carrying some meat in his mouth. When he saw his own reflection in the river, he wanted the meat that was ‘in’ the water too. So he started barking, and when he did the meat in his mouth fell into the river and was washed away… That kind of foolishness is what they call Araragism.”

“That’s not a word! Don’t try to make me the gold standard for foolishness. Anyway, the water just looked like regular water to me. And the surface seemed totally normal too.”

“Hmmm. So even though you’re a vampire, surfaces reflect your image.”

“No, I’m not a vampire anymore… I just have some lingering after-effects. My reflection appears in regular old mirrors too.”

“That reminds me, don’t they say vampires can’t cross rivers and can’t

swim and stuff like that? Are you able to swim, Araragi?”

“Hm? Well, I haven’t tried, but…I wonder. I probably can, right?”

What about Shinobu, though?

While she was a little girl, her vampiric level seemed higher than mine… I got the sense that she was at the mercy of her identity.

“Well, whether or not an aberration was involved, it’s still a pretty strange story,” I said. “It’d be one thing if it were her mother, but her father…”

Not like I know all about her mother, but the simple fact that she’d bequeathed the “monkey” to Kanbaru suggested she had some connection to *all that.*

Especially considering how Kanbaru’s seemingly sound grandparents despised her even before she stole their only son from them.

“It seems more like a curse than a charm,” commented Senjogahara. “Sending your image to your soul mate.”

“You make it sound so scary. What are you trying to make Kanbaru’s mother out to be?”

“Juuust─” Senjogahara said in a playful tone. No, her tone was totally flat, only the stretched-out vowel was playful. “Kidding, hellooo.”

“…Right, of course you are.”

“I’d already heard that story from Kanbaru, though.”

“Huh?”

Just gonna drop that into the conversation, eh?

How about a “the fact is” at the beginning there or something?

“What. It’s not like I told you I hadn’t heard it. Me and Kanbaru go way back, of course I know about stuff like that. Seeing as you only just met her, if

you knew something about her that I didn't, that's what would be shocking."

"…"

As far as I could tell from this defense, she'd heard the story back in middle school, not after the recent rebirth of the Valhalla Duo.

"I didn't mean any harm. I just wanted to savor how ridiculous you were, proudly relating to me this story you'd heard from Kanbaru."

"That's the cruelest thing I've ever heard…"

So damn cruel, even when she didn't mean any harm? What kind of a person was she?

"Well, the truth is that I'd heard it but totally forgotten about it. I remembered partway through. Like, *oh yeah, that rings a bell*—then again, back when I was the one getting invited to Kanbaru's house and being allowed to use the bath and stuff, I was a good kid, so I never said anything uncouth."

"Huh?"

Um, uncouth?

What's she talking about?

"Of course, unlike you I did share the tub with Kanbaru. Heheh, jealous, aren't you?"

"That's not what I want to ask about…"

Senjogahara and Kanbaru in the bath together?

Not jealous at all, more like scared.

Don't wanna go anywhere near that.

"…What do you mean, you didn't say anything uncouth?"

"I'm telling you I had a good personality at the time. In other words, I wasn't a low-down, twisted, unpleasant woman like I am now."

I gasped. A little *too* self-aware, aren't we…

Heedless of my reaction, Senjogahara went on. "I'm saying that I didn't boorishly offer my analysis of a love story that was romantic, and not a tale of an aberration—"

006

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

We don’t need to fall back on the Greek myth of Narcissus to say that people love themselves—in a biological sense in addition to self-love or self-infatuation.

They do so out of an instinctual hereditary drive to pass on their genes to future generations.

People hold themselves in high esteem, they idealize themselves.

Senjogahara was the one who said this.

“Huh? What? So, are you trying to tell me Kanbaru’s father thought his own reflection in the bathwater was his ‘soul mate’? I mean, come on, that… can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s idiotic.”

“Exactly, it’s an idiotic story. And pointing that out is like calling Kanbaru’s father an idiot, so I didn’t tell Kanbaru. I wouldn’t say something that harsh even now, so of course I wouldn’t when I was in middle school.”

“…That’s on the level of the fable you told about the dog. He’d realize. How could anyone in the world not recognize his or her own face?”

“No one in the world knows it that intimately. The face you see in the mirror is flipped left to right. In photographs and videos, the colors and sense of depth are completely different. We ourselves are actually the ones who’re least familiar with the us that people see.”

“That’s not what we’re talking about here…”

“For example, Araragi, people from other families all look alike, right? But the members of those families don’t think so. You and your sisters look disturbingly alike, but I bet you don’t think you look all that similar.”

“Disturbingly? Thanks for that…though I guess I see what you mean. But aren’t you just saying that it’s easier to tell people apart if you’re used to seeing them, than if you’re not? Like how a counterfeit might fool a layman, but an expert would be able to tell the difference─”

“Yeah. Well, no, but it’ll do.”

“No? Whatever, anyone looking at a face reflected in the water would at least be able to tell if it’s their own.”

“Not really. In a mirror, maybe─but…”

“…”

“A watery surface is moving, sparkling, it’s blurry─it’s not the same as looking in a mirror. You’ve heard of the uncanny valley, right? How with CG or robots or whatever, the more humanlike you make them look, the less human they seem─the dissimilarity actually becomes more distinct, and they start to seem creepier. I think you’ll agree that my metaphor is more accurate.”

“The uncanny valley…”

“They also say that once you cross the uncanny valley, the feeling of intimacy grows by leaps and bounds. Though I’ve heard incest and hating your kin are rooted in the same sort of reasons. The point is, your own image, reflected on water, *can not look like you*─they make mirrors that are rigged so the reflection isn’t flipped left to right, but apparently most people who look in them think: *That’s not me.* And they say people experience a similar disconnect

when they see the reflection of a close friend or relative."

"…So he didn't perceive the self he saw reflected in the bathwater as himself because it wasn't the 'self' he took for granted from constantly seeing it in the mirror?"

"Yes. And if he only saw it occasionally, mightn't that blurry self look like a girl?"

"I mean…that's possible, I guess, since when you're a little kid the difference between genders is a lot less obvious—it's a fine answer if we're talking about the kind of charms or fortune-telling that girls are into, but once you're a grownup, or once you've reached a certain level of discernment, you'd realize what was going on."

"And he did. Which is why he stopped seeing her at a certain point."

"…"

"But it's another question entirely whether you connect that to recollections of seeing such a thing in the past. Her father must've retained his memory of discerning someone's image in the water."

"…And thought that it was his 'soul mate'? That's a hell of an assumption—though I guess the dad we're talking about here is Kanbaru's dad."

"You've got it backwards. He met someone who seemed like his 'soul mate,' and she reminded him of the reflection he'd seen in the water all those years ago."

"Hm? Oh, I get it… Yeah, you must be right, for a third party discussing this in hindsight, the cause and effect are backwards…but that's not how he felt. As far as he knew, he finally found the answer to a puzzle from his childhood."

"Love aside, we tend to seek out people like ourselves, so…"

So.

Senjogahara left off there. Instead—

“This is all just my interpretation, of course,” she summed it up.

That summation may have been her way of hiding her embarrassment—or of apologizing for being unable to swallow a romantic story without analyzing it first.

There was no way of knowing the truth.

It was just her interpretation, not the solution—she’d said accordingly.

Kanbaru and her father saw it one way, and she saw it another way, that was all. Senjogahara had decided that Papa Kanbaru’s interpretation was “unlikely,” or even “impossible,” but conversely he might think her quibbling explanation was “unlikely” or “impossible.”

And the fact that Kanbaru’s father had only ever seen “her” in that bath—in that well water, in other words—could lend credence to the idea that there really was something mysterious about the water itself.

Senjogahara would likely dismiss the specificity of the location with an interpretation like a greater chance for tricks of the light. And I have to say I’m with her—I’m also the type who can’t accept romantic notions at face value, who needs to nitpick them all the way down the line. So I wasn’t inclined to say anything uncouth, to use her word, about her take on it.

In that regard.

Maybe Senjogahara and I were a couple of peas in a pod—a couple, and peas in a pod.

“Well, goodbye. Good night. See you at school tomorrow.”

Was not how Senjogahara signed off.

“If you say one wrong word to Kanbaru, I’ll kill you. I’ll never forgive you. Even if it was a slip of the tongue, you’d be better off killing yourself before tomorrow morning.”

Then my girlfriend hung up.

I seriously don’t get her, I thought as I placed a second call, this time to Kanbaru, figuring that it was still probably just early enough.

The pretext for the call was to report that I’d gotten home safely, but the truth was that there was also something I wanted to ask her—believe me, I had no intention of saying one wrong word.

I didn’t particularly feel like killing myself before dawn.

“Hey, Kanbaru. I meant to ask—what about you? When you look into that bathwater, what do you see?”

The reason I asked: If her father’s interpretation was correct, then Kanbaru would see her future mate reflected there. If Senjogahara’s interpretation was correct, however, what my junior saw reflected there might be—

Her mother.

Toé Gaen.

Kanbaru might see her—just like her father had. In the rippling image of herself reflected on the surface, she might well see the mother whose blood ran in her veins. The mother who’d had such an enormous influence on my junior’s life, who affected her even now through that left arm—but then, I have no idea which of her parents she resembles more, so for all I knew it could be her father she saw there. Depending on the movement of the water, she might even see both of them.

Mom and dad.

She might even see—the two of them there together.

And if so—that really was romantic, in its own way. Her departed parents, together, reunited in her eyes…

“Hm? Oh. I see my own boobs, of course. Which are reaaally sexy, if I do say so myself, I spend the entire time I’m in the bath staring at them. The contrast with my abs is reaaally evocative, and I oversoak myself on a nightly basis sitting there captivated by the sight. To be honest, nothing else enters my eyes. But, why do you ask, Araragi-senpai—”

I hung up.

CHAPTER FIVE
KOYOMI WIND

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		

8

August

001

What does Nadeko Sengoku, a girl in her second year of middle school, think about roads? Does she even think about them at all? I'm forced to conclude that she probably doesn't. I'm just making an assumption, of course, and depending on how you look at it, that might be a very rude thing to say. But a girl who always keeps her head down, who goes through life with eyes downcast, doesn't see the road; the only thing she sees is her own two feet.

She's a shoegazer.

I'm not saying that's a bad thing.

Please don't misunderstand, I'm not trying to be critical—having walked, sometimes even run through life with my eyes completely shut, how could someone like me, with quite literally no foresight, take issue with Sengoku, who has lived with her eyes fixed on her feet by hook or by crook, or rather, head-on without a wayward glance?

As someone who avoids looking at any part of himself, feet included, and who as a result lost sight of himself completely, I should be praising rather than criticizing Sengoku and her perpetually downturned gaze.

Step.

By step.

Always staring down at her feet—at her shoes, regardless of where she's coming from or where she's going. In a sense, in every sense, that's a grueling life.

Life can be like that.

Life is like that.

It’s not for you or me to dismiss—at least, to dismiss out of hand.

Still, while hers may be a life, is she walking the path of humanity? Sengoku, who doesn’t know what path she’s following, who doesn’t even know the name of the road she’s on, has nothing to say about humanity.

The more important, the most important thing I want to point out about the way Nadeko Sengoku goes through life, however, is that if you live your life with your head down—

If you’re always focused on your feet, then you might manage to avoid falling, or tripping, or straying from the path—but you can’t avoid running into things unless you watch where you’re going.

And there’s this, which may not be all that important, but talk of humanity aside—when you take the low road.

The path of the snake, as in a real snake.

There are no feet in sight.

“P-Pardon me for intruding, Big Brother Koyomi.”

“Oh, it’s you. Thanks for coming by, Sengoku. C’mon in.”

“I-It is an intrusion, isn’t it, Nadeko’ll just head home.”

“You can’t leave, you just got here!”

“G-G-Goodbye. It’s been fun.”

“Not yet it hasn’t?!”

“It…it was the greatest day ever.”

“You get that much of a kick out of taking off your shoes in our front hall?! Have you found the secret to happiness?!”

One day in early August—during summer break.

A day when a case involving a certain swindler had been settled for the moment, and my little sister’s friend Nadeko Sengoku had come by the house—as promised.

The excuse was that I’d gotten intel on the swindler from Sengoku, and now I was going to give her the rundown on what’d happened along with a proper thank you.

The correct thing probably would’ve been for me to go to her house to express my gratitude—but when I went to hang out over there last month, despite the fact that we had a great time playing The Game of Life, things eventually got weird and I ended up kind of fleeing from Sengoku’s mother, so I didn’t really have a strong inclination to head that way again.

Animal instinct, perhaps.

Or aberrational instinct.

Which is why I called Sengoku up and invited her over to our house—I thought about meeting her on the road and giving her an escort back, but, “That’s, okay,” was the response I got.

I mean, she’d come over to our place with Kanbaru month before last, so she knew where it was—and she used to come over all the time to see my sister when they were in elementary school anyway.

If she could get here on her own, no need to be overbearing—spare the road and spoil the child, as they say.

Nevertheless, Sengoku isn’t the most reliable kid, so I was a little anxious that she wouldn’t show up at the appointed hour, and if she didn’t I had every intention of pulling out all the stops to find her—but the doorbell rang at precisely the appointed time.

She was so punctual that it almost seemed like she’d been waiting outside the gate monitoring the atomic clock or something—she didn’t have a cell phone, though, so that wasn’t possible.

Maybe she’d synchronized her watch with it before she left the house—well, no, I guess no one’s that anal.

Every single one of Sengoku’s phone calls is precisely at the top of the hour in my cell’s log, but that’s obviously just a coincidence too.

“Anyway, come in. It’s fine, I cleaned my room and everything.”

“Ah, o-okay…”

“Everything’s set, so we can party all night!”

“E-Eek.”

I’d meant this as a joke to make her feel more relaxed, since she seemed

anxious about being at my house despite knowing me for so long, but she'd taken it literally and shrunk back in terror. She was quaking in her boots.

Hmmm.

Then again, in the six months since our reunion, I'd never really seen Sengoku not panic-stricken.

Sengoku = panic-stricken.

This was her personality, so maybe there was nothing I could do about it—I guess I just needed to keep a close watch over her from here on out.

When I'd been the one darkening her door, she'd had her bangs pulled up with a hair band, but today, perhaps because she'd walked here, she was in her default mode, bangs down over her face.

I couldn't even get a glimpse of her expression.

So to be perfectly honest, I had no idea what she was really feeling.

From the looks of it, she was being bashful, or maybe reserved, but it was equally possible that she was just repulsed.

If she felt at a loss, like she couldn't refuse the persistent invitations of her friend's older brother and ended up somewhere she didn't want to be, I couldn't feel worse, that is, what a big misunderstanding…

I want to believe that wasn't what was going on.

If she'd only be a little more frank, it would make everything okay—seriously, even just one percent as frank as Kanbaru.

Just when Senjogahara's acid tongue, or dispiritingly acrimonious disposition, was showing signs of mellowing—promising to go into remission after the con-man case, I just couldn't face being hated by my little sister's friend.

It would interfere with, impede, my exam prep.

“C’mon, get those shoes off already. Come in already.”

“R-Right. Okay. Off they come. Whatever you say. Anything at all.”

“…”

How so timid…

If she hated me, I suppose there was nothing I could do about it, but could she please not bring undue suspicion on me with her antics?

Anyway, whether she was being bashful, or watchful, or just plain waffling, Sengoku somehow made it across the threshold—and followed me right on up to the second floor.

“Tsukihi was supposed to be here too…but apparently she’s still stuck mopping up.”

“M-Mopping up? After what?”

“That swindler, obviously—not like I know what that actually means. Yeah, I have no idea what Karen or Tsukihi is thinking—”

Nor what Sengoku is.

I just don’t understand how middle school girls think, I guess—though that’s a real can of worms. How can you ever really know what anyone else is thinking?

Even Shinobu, with our link and everything—I can’t say I understand her.

“W-Wow. It’s true. It’s a party, you’re throwing Nadeko a party.”

At long last, after a whole stack of waffling—it took us thirty minutes to go a distance of not even thirty steps—Sengoku finally started to sound happy and excited when she got to my room.

Though it was less about the room and more about the snacks and juice

spread out on the floor.

It was pretty modest as parties go, and there wasn't any surprise element—in fact, the warm welcome I'd received at Sengoku's house the other day had been a few notches more lavish—but I was just glad that it made her happy.

Though it was actually my sister who'd done all the preparation for this "party," not me… It was after she'd put the finishing touches on it that she'd gone out to "mop up after that swindler."

Part of me hated her thoroughness, but maybe it was only to be expected from someone who'd become the boss of all the middle school girls in the area.

Show Nadeko the same good time I would, Tsukihi had directed me—quite the direction, when it came from your own little sister.

"Wh-Whoa, popcorn. Nice! Let's stuff our faces full of popcorn… Nadeko's gonna pack it in till she can't breathe. Then swallow it without chewing."

"You'll die."

"Dreamy."

Sengoku squatted down, sounding entranced.

I was a little surprised anyone could be so happy about snacks… Maybe she wasn't allowed to eat sweets at home?

Given how cloyingly sweet her parents were to her…

It was surprising indeed.

Hup, Sengoku plopped down on a cushion and started taking off her socks. Both left and right. Apparently she wanted to be barefoot—and she was, before I could finish the thought.

She carefully folded her socks and laid them next to her.

“…”

She took off her socks almost like people take off their hats indoors, but… huh? Hang on, I dunno. I dunno I dunno. Is there some rule of etiquette that you take off your socks when you’re in someone else’s room?

I had very little experience being in other people’s rooms, so it didn’t help much by way of comparison…

I was always only going to Senjogahara’s or Kanbaru’s room…and in Kanbaru’s case, never mind socks, you could get hurt if you went in there without work boots.

“Y-You said Tsukihi had gone out…” It was clearly taking Sengoku everything she had to restrain an overwhelming urge to go buck wild on the smorgasbord of snacks laid out before her. Somehow managing to set aside her desire to shove her face full of popcorn at the earliest possible opportunity, she asked, “What about Karen?”

“Her too. They’re a set, a package deal.”

True, the difference in size made it hard to bundle them together, so they might not be easy to sell as a set… What to do with them?

Nothing, some people would say, it just wasn’t something you did to your little sisters.

“Y-Your good parents?”

“Well, that’s a very polite way of putting it… No, my good parents are also out, that is, at work. Holidays, summer break─their jobs don’t have anything to do with those things. By which I mean they don’t have any of those things.”

“R-Really… Th-Then it’s just the two of us today, Big Brother Koyomi.”

“Hm? Well, since you put it that way, yeah, it’s just the two of us.

Something wrong with that?”

“Of course not. Teeheeheeheehee,” Sengoku giggled adorably.

Finally.

Huh, I guess she was so tense because she was worried about my parents—other people’s parents are definitely a source of tension, that’s for sure.

I’d had a hell of a time with Senjogahara’s dad, and even if we don’t bring that in, I did run away from Sengoku’s mother. And while I’m totally used to it now, to the point that I’ll go hang out with them even when Kanbaru isn’t there, at first her grandparents made me nervous too.

“Well, first off, welcome, Sengoku.”

I poured juice into the two glasses I’d set out, and handing one to Sengoku, we started off with a toast.

“Y-Yeah! Nadeko is welcome, Big Brother Koyomi! Cheers! Happy birthday!”

“…”

My birthday’s in April.

“I see… It’s all taken care of. Nice, phew.”

Naturally, I couldn’t share everything about what had happened with the swindler, but as we ate our snacks and drank our juice, I told Sengoku everything she needed to know.

It seemed to give her peace of mind.

She was relieved—that is, it was probably a real load off her mind. Which made sense, seeing as her involvement with the case had gone one step further, one step deeper than any of the other middle school girls who were affected.

Thanks to Oshino—and also thanks very much to Kanbaru—she hadn’t gotten sucked in any further than that, but I’m sure she hadn’t been able to rest easy until just now.

“Maybe not ‘all’—from my perspective it’s got kind of a bitter aftertaste, it’s gray—or something,” I mused. “It’s a hazy, or a middle-of-the-road resolution.”

“But nothing else bad is going to happen?”

“Right… In that sense, I guess it can’t be beat.”

Though I wasn’t sure if it couldn’t be beat, or if we just couldn’t beat it.

Not sure in the slightest.

This might be a pessimistic attitude, or a straight-up negative one depending on how you look at it, but either way, in so far as things weren’t going to get any worse, a resolution was a resolution.

No, a resolution is a resolution, full stop—my little sisters got too big for their britches and got caught with their pants down, but I was never involved in

the first place. Why should the peanut gallery have anything to say about it?

No one likes a backseat driver.

Holding this little victory celebration might've been ridiculous, when you get right down to it, but ignoring that little quibble—just that loathsome swindler leaving our town called for a toast, for me personally.

We'd made him promise never to show his face in our town again—so "when you get right down to it," that alone was reason enough to throw one hell of a party.

"You said Tsukihi and Karen are 'mopping up,' but…hashtag how do you think it's going?"

"Hashtag?"

Were we on Twitter?

I'd associated her more with Twister than Twitter…

"Oh, sorry," Sengoku corrected herself, "how do you think it's going?"

"Who knows."

I felt bad giving such a lackluster response after making her go to the trouble of correcting herself, but "who knows" was the only answer I could muster—since unlike my little sisters, I wasn't tapped into the middle school girl network.

Thinking about it that way really threw the peculiarity of what that swindler had done, had tried to do, into stark relief… Seriously, it gave me the creeps.

Intentionally spreading charms.

Curses.

Aberrations—

"Hmm…do you think Tsukihi's mop-up involves rooting out those

aberrations one by one?”

“No…I think that might be impossible. If I had to guess, I’d say she’s probably trying to comfort the victims, something along those lines─though maybe she’s trying to do some of that too.”

Trying to, maybe, but I think that’d be beyond her. At that point you’re completely in the realm of information warfare. That’d be too much to handle, even for the strategist of the Fire Sisters─no, saying “even for the strategist of the Fire Sisters” begs the question of just how formidable the Fire Sisters are in the first place.

“Th-The Fire Sisters are awesome, Big Brother Koyomi. Maybe it’s hard to tell because you’re family, but they’re really, really, really awesome.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Really, realty awesome.”

“Realty?”

Even if you took her words with a grain of salt, or with a whole handful, someone as quiet and modest as Sengoku insisting so firmly made me wonder if it might not be true after all.

Maybe the Fire Sisters were awesome.

“They are! So awesome that Nadeko gets to be the big man on campus just because we’re friends!”

“Do you really act like the big man?”

Not a chance.

For this tiny little girl to be the big man…

“N-No,” *ahem,* Sengoku cleared her throat.

Even that was cute.

“But seriously, no exaggeration, being friends with the Fire Sisters means Nadeko’s got enough influence to rake in some money.”

“Sounds like the wrong kind of influence…”

That’s exactly how swindlers are born.

Were my siblings being used to pitch fraudulent investment schemes or something? I’ve heard it said that too much justice breeds crime, and maybe the Fire Sisters had reached that point.

Though I’m sure nothing could be further from their intentions…

“Speaking of which, an imitation group called the Cold Sisters debuted recently.”

“That’s a pretty obvious fake.”

Well, if you ask me, my sisters are the fakes—or no, that’d be going too far. To me, they’ll always be the kind of slovenly little sisters who strut around the house naked, but to Sengoku they’re old friends, and nothing’s going to change that. I’m sure she’s not interested in hearing them slandered, even by a member of their own family.

“*Doki doki! Fire Sisters* also came out.”

“That just sounds like a special, to fill the gap between seasons.”

That or a whole new show.

Huh, so my sisters aired their final episode without my knowing it…

“Now, whether my sisters can handle it or not, rumors only last for seventy-five days, as the saying goes. I think the right way to handle the ghost stories that swindler spread around town is to leave things alone, watch and wait, not do anything rash.”

“It’s all so complex… Do you think there’s anything Nadeko can do? To

help Tsukihi and Karen… Actually, Nadeko was hoping to talk to them about that today."

"If there's something you can do, it's to bounce back from that snake case and stand on your own two feet, I think—though I'm not sure things will ever go back to the way they were."

"…That makes it sound like Nadeko was standing to begin with. But it feels like Nadeko was crawling even before that. Slithering along the ground, like a snake…" she brooded. Then, with a sudden "A…awawa," she grabbed a handful of popcorn and crammed it into her mouth. Just like she'd said she wanted to earlier.

Like a squirrel—or very much like a snake.

Though she didn't swallow it whole. She munched it to bits.

"Wh-What the hell," I said, thinking at the same time how cute everything she did was.

Munch munch, munch, she finished eating the popcorn before answering, "Um, lessee, Big Brother Koyomi. In Nadeko's case it's clear, but how did Mister Swindler…"

It was charmingly typical of her to say "Mister" Swindler, but as someone who'd actually met and spoken with "Mister" Swindler, it rubbed me the wrong way, somewhat.

I'd have told anyone but Sengoku never to call that bastard "mister" again.

"How did he spread those rumors?"

"Hunh?"

"Those rumors, or charms, or ghost stories…that occult stuff… How—"

"Oh, well, it was like a get-rich-quick scheme—he spread free trial charms

around the middle school girl community, then waited in the wings to sell them charms that actually cost money…”

Come to think of it, it was such a current sales philosophy.

Give out the basic version for free, then sell the optional add-ons… He was right on trend, just as you’d expect from a man who’d devoted his life to the career of a con man.

Nah.

Being a con man wasn’t a career, it was a crime.

“No, no, Big Brother Koyomi. Nadeko is asking ‘how,’ not ‘how come’…”

“Hm? You want to know more about his methods, not his goal? His methods─” I started out like she was asking something obvious, ready to launch into a big lecture on the subject as her dependable “big brother” if that was what she wanted. When I actually tried, though, nothing came out.

Oops.

Methods?

He spread rumors targeted at middle school girls, vaguely speaking… But yeah, seriously, how do you go about doing that?

As an expert, Oshino made his living collecting tales of aberrations─urban legends, the word on the street, secondhand gossip; that’s what he came to this town to gather, and then he left.

Whether that actually constitutes a profession is another question entirely, and we’ll leave it aside once again, but in some sense it’s straightforward─what he does is put out his net and catch whatever rumors are floating around, whatever stories are circulating.

He’s in the position of observer, poacher, recorder, you might say─in other

words, he’s on the listening end of things, so it might not be easy, but it’s still the kind of thing anyone could do, at least to some extent.

You can go out and hear the stories for yourself, you can opt to go more contemporary and search for them on the internet—there are plenty of methods available.

But what about the opposite?

Urban legends, the word on the street, secondhand gossip.

What about spreading them rather than collecting them?

As the teller, not the listener—what would your methods actually be?

As transmitter rather than receiver.

And if you’re not just transmitting but also controlling the subsequent course of the transmission—we’re getting into seriously difficult territory.

Setting a trap instead of a net—how would you go about it?

“Sengoku. You tried to deal with it yourself, didn’t you? The rumor, the ghost story that the swindler put about.”

A snake.

A snake aberration.

“Y-Yeah. But it didn’t go so well.”

“Doesn’t matter if you succeeded or not—you tried to use something you found in a book, right? Rather than buy anything from him.”

I’m pretty sure that was the case.

No doubt about it, really, since I’d seen Sengoku from behind at the bookstore, doing research—everything about that swindler’s grand plan was abominable, but nevertheless, if there was one saving grace.

If I had to find one saving grace, it’d be the fact that she’d avoided direct

contact with him. If that bad omen personified, if he even was a person, had laid eyes on Nadeko Sengoku, who looked even more helpless than a chihuahua, she would never have come out of it unscathed.

Even Karen had such a terrible time of it.

If it were Sengoku…

“Y-Yeah. Come to think of it, Nadeko probably could’ve gotten in touch with Mister Swindler with a little effort… If only we’d met up,” she said bravely, “Nadeko could’ve tied him up and handed him over to the police.”

“No chance,” I let a typical retort slip out.

That aside—it wasn’t as if finding out now helped in any way, and Sengoku probably wasn’t asking me for any pressing reason, but I’d be lying if I said my curiosity wasn’t piqued.

That swindler.

How had he spread those rumors?

“Who did everyone hear them from in the first place? It wasn’t from the swindler—himself?”

“As far as Nadeko knows, how people answered when Tsukihi asked around was—a whisper on the wind.”

“…”

The wind?

“Urban legends are a kind of folklore…the kind of thing that happened to ‘a friend of a friend.’ But if you actually try to find that ‘friend of a friend,’ you’ll come up empty—”

On the subject of the swindler himself, I had nothing more to tell Sengoku—that is, nothing more that I was able to tell her, so I decided to pass the time with a discussion of this new topic until Tsukihi and Karen got home.

Calling it a discussion might be a bit of an exaggeration, since it was just for fun—I had no illusions that it would prove useful down the line.

But leaving aside the rumors disseminated by that swindler for a moment, I was pretty sure I remembered something similar from back during spring break.

It was already months ago—at the time I wasn’t studying for exams yet, nor had I had any dealings with aberrations. But the very first time I talked with Hanekawa, before we were even in the same class, she told me a rumor that was going around about a “vampire.”

A blond vampire.

An iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire.

Overpoweringly beautiful—and as I recall, that rumor, too, spread mostly among girls.

The charms cooked up by that swindler and the rumor of the “vampire” were alike in that regard.

It didn’t necessarily mean they had some common denominator, though. Maybe girls—that is, females, just like to gossip more than males do.

I’ve heard that it’s women who create the trends at any given moment—so isn’t it possible that folklore, too, comes out of such a community? It would explain why that swindler chose to target girls.

“Though maybe this kind of ‘talk’ is a type of rumor as well…since there are girls like you, Sengoku, who are outside the rumor mill, and I heard about the vampire even though I’m a boy.”

“Totally. So instead of a narrow focus, Big Brother Koyomi, we should question the question of how rumors spread more generally, more broadly.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” *Question the question* sounded pretty odd, but Sengoku seemed to be as linguistically hopeless as myself, so I let it go. This was no time to be pedantic about semantics. “The process by which rumors spread—or should I say the process by which rumors *are* spread? How did that swindler make it happen…”

The propagation of urban legends.

The spread of secondhand gossip.

“…The thing is, if he could wrap his head around something like that, I feel like he wouldn’t have to stoop to something with as poor a cost performance index as swindling.”

“Not everyone is motivated by cost performance, though, are they, Big Brother Koyomi? Nadeko never actually met him, so it’s hard to say…but from everything you’ve said, it seems like he’s the kind of person who just enjoys deceiving people.”

“Well, you’re right about that…”

But I don’t think it’s even a question of whether or not he enjoys it.

It seems more pathological or…like it’s his karma or something.

So maybe swindling wasn't a career he chose of his own free will—maybe it was the only path open to him.

Which means that he's a victim too—is something I would never think, though, not ever.

He's a perpetrator any way you slice it.

I mean, come on.

"Maybe we need to think of making trends and making a profit from trends as two separate things," I suggested. "That swindler said himself that this time around he'd failed…"

Is it basically a question of getting out while the market is still good? Duping people with baseless rumors and turning a profit off it are two different things—yeah, if we were going to have this discussion, that's the first thing we needed to recognize.

"After all, we're not trying to deduce the method for starting a trend, and to unravel the mystery of a swindler's methods, in order to get rich quick."

"Wha?" Sengoku looked startled, then tried to salvage the situation by saying, "Oh, uh, uh huh. Right. Of course not."

…She'd been hoping to get rich quick.

Well, that in and of itself wasn't something to reprimand her for. As long as it's obtained by legitimate means, there's nothing to criticize about making money, or making money your goal—though as a high school senior who'd shouldered a five-million-yen debt, I didn't know about getting too engrossed in it.

"But, Big Brother Koyomi. If someone did figure out how to intentionally create rumors, or trends…if they had that kind of artificial know-how, that'd be

pretty awesome. It'd be the discovery of the century. They could create a social phenomenon."

"Well, personally, I have no desire to create a social phenomenon… Although we're trying to think this through, it's not even clear that you really could artificially generate ghost stories or urban legends or trends."

"B-But, Nadeko's heard about that happening. Like, they decide next year's popular fashions at meetings a whole year earlier."

"Yeah, I've heard that too. But I've also heard that the fashions they come up with at those meetings don't necessarily take off…" That seems like precisely the kind of thing Oshino could elucidate for us clearly and succinctly; there really are organizations that are trying to create trends, even if they aren't swindlers. "But that's neither here nor there. First maybe we should try and define the object of our discussion: a fad, in other words."

Right, even if this was just for fun, I'd be lying if I said I didn't harbor a faint hope that it might come in handy if someone like that swindler showed up to menace our town again.

If you know your enemy and know yourself—as Sun Tzu said.

Either way, the difference between baseless rumors and urban legends kind of escapes me—you can't distinguish between them on the basis of which are true and which are false, for instance, because they're all false.

Reality is inherently a mixture of truth and fiction.

"A definition, huh? Does hearing it from 'a friend of a friend' count as one? Since we're talking about a whisper on the wind—"

"But 'a friend of a friend' is hard to define. And something you hear from 'a friend of a friend' is actually just something you hear from your friend—in

which case it's a game of telephone…"

And so our conference began in earnest.

It wasn't a meeting to decide next year's fashions, nothing nearly so serious, but I still cleared away the snacks and set up the table because I thought it might create a certain atmosphere.

I opened a notebook and took out a pen—it felt like we were about to start a study session. Though any conference that Sengoku and I were holding would be over in a heartbeat if Hanekawa were present.

"I guess maybe the first definition should be 'something you end up knowing without knowing it.' In other words, something that you learn even though you make no active effort to obtain the information…"

"Totally. The 'charms' that went around school were like that too. Everyone was doing them before you knew it…almost like it was contagious."

"Contagious…"

"But that makes it sound like the flu or something."

"Actually, *influenza* originally meant something like 'outbreak,' didn't it? So given that these things spread like a pandemic, it makes sense to think of them the same way. Hmm…"

In which case, can we define a rumor as "something infectious"? You can hazard a guess, but it's difficult to pin down exactly who you were infected by… and by the time you realize what's going on, you've already got the symptoms.

A whisper on the wind, well put.

Though it might be more of a tickle in the throat.

"If that's the case, then what that swindler did to this town was almost like a kind of bioterrorism. I remember hearing something at some point about the

three principles of infectious diseases…”

Umm, I tried to recall them.

Of course the person I’d heard this from was Hanekawa─ almost all of my knowledge comes from her or Senjogahara.

“Oh wow, what are they? These three pillars.”

“No, I think the three pillars are friendship, effort, and victory, but─umm.”

The three principles of infectious diseases.

Or the three principles of pandemics.

“① Rapid rate of infection. ② Wide scope of infection. ③ Resistant to countermeasures─I’m pretty sure that was it. Seems like you could apply these three principles to rumors just as easily.”

“Kind of like weapon speed, range, and power?” Sengoku offered.

That’s right, I forgot she was a gamer.

“Nadeko more or less understands speed and range…but what does ‘resistant to countermeasures’ mean, Big Brother Koyomi?”

“Well, just what it sounds like─once the infection starts, once it starts to spread, it can’t be stopped. Or really I should say, ‘It can’t be stopped easily’…”

“But rumors only last for seventy-five days, right?”

“Yeah. But that also means you’ve got to resign yourself to them until seventy-five days have passed─”

Even the Fire Sisters had found themselves playing catch-up. And they still weren’t caught up─in the end, the only real way to stop an outbreak or an epidemic is prevention, to stop it before it starts.

“I see…” Sengoku nodded solemnly.

In her own way she was doing everything she could to contribute to the

proper atmosphere of a meeting. Adorable, but it wasn't working. I couldn't rid myself of the sense that she was "playing make-believe."

Maybe the same was true for me…

"That goes for a naturally occurring rumor as much as it does for an artificial one like the ones the swindler created─I have a hard time believing that his plan included getting the 'charms' he'd unleashed back under control again…"

Even if things had turned out well for him, he'd probably meant to go as big as he could and then skip town without worrying about what happened afterwards.

A real scorched-earth policy…

"With Mister Swindler, the speed of infection was amazing… Those 'charms' worked their magic in just a few months."

"The scope, too… An entire town."

And the frightening part is that it was all done by just one person.

It's not praiseworthy, and I have no desire to praise him, but damn, that swindler is really something.

"So taking those principles as the basic requirements…let's think of a method that fulfills all three. Come on, there's nothing he can do that we can't."

Okay, I guess there are.

But it didn't cost me anything to say it.

Then again, there's no such thing as a free lunch.

"Sengoku. If it were you, for instance, what would you do? Say…if you were going to try and popularize something like an aberration tale. If you were going to do it intentionally."

“Hmmm… It’s kind of hard for Nadeko to see what creating a fad actually requires…” After considering it, she continued, “But it seems like the easiest and quickest thing would be to ‘make something that’s already popular even more popular.’”

Damn.

Kind of hard for her to see what it actually required? She’d just come up with a surprisingly actual methodology—hitting the nail on the head, in fact.

“If there’s already some sort of foundation, something to build on, then the trail is already blazed for you… Maybe like how, neurologically speaking, once a synaptic connection has been made, it becomes easier for subsequent electrical impulses to travel the same route?” We probably could’ve done without the neuroscience analogy, but I was showing off for Sengoku. I wanted to try and sound intellectual. Whether or not I succeeded is another question. “There are plenty of variations, like ‘re-popularizing something that used to be popular’… With ghost stories, for instance, they say the same tropes come back again in ten- or hundred-year cycles… You’re totally right, that would be the easiest and quickest way to do it.”

“Y-You think?”

Embarrassed Sengoku.

Embarrassengoku.

Disgustingly cute.

“Ehehe.”

“But while you might be able to create a trend that way, you wouldn’t be able to create the trend you want…which is fine if your only goal is to create *some* trend.”

“Oh…sorry.”

“Um, it’s nothing to apologize for…”

This girl apologizes compulsively.

She hadn’t apologized yet today, and I figured she might make it to the end, but uh-uh, no dice.

I hate constantly using that unpleasant swindler as an example, but if he wanted to popularize tales of aberrations as efficiently as possible, it would’ve made sense to disseminate the “vampire” story. It had already infected the girls once, so the foundation was laid.

If he didn’t, it was because he didn’t see the benefit—*“vampires” aren’t a moneymaker,* he must’ve judged.

“I wonder if the vampire rumors made the rounds over spring break—that is, *made the rounds so easily,* because vampires are already such a familiar concept,” I said.

“Totally. Every single person in Japan knows about them… TV, manga, movies…and video games too. Vampires are always being shoved down our throats. Maybe instead of something that ‘used to be popular,’ they’re just part of the culture now…”

“Hmm. Part of the culture…”

Well.

It’s the way of the world that the things we take for granted suddenly go out of fashion, but the object of our current discussion was the rise of trends, not their decline.

“It’s definitely easier for well-known things…that is, things with a certain brand recognition, to become a fad. But something that already has that

foundation might deviate from our definition of going viral—since it wouldn't need that explosive infectiousness. Let's forget about making something famous even more famous, what about the know-how to make something unknown famous for the first time?"

"Uh… In that case, there's TV, and the…what do you call it."

"Mass media?"

Introducing something to the public through TV, newspapers, magazines, that's definitely a common way of spreading these infections.

"Ah, that's it. Mass media. Publicity, or advertising."

"Advertising, yeah…but even if it's not an ad, whenever the media introduces anything, fiction or nonfiction, there's some awareness of trying to 'spread' or 'popularize' it."

There must be.

It wouldn't make any sense to present something to the public at large with no intention of popularizing it. People who succeed often say, "I never expected everyone to be so into it," but they're either being humble or humblebragging.

"Still," noted Sengoku, "isn't that kind of related to what we were saying before? Something that's advertised on TV or in the newspaper is probably already famous to some degree, isn't it?"

"Hmmm…you may be right."

If the media's role is to facilitate the transition from "people in the know knowing about it" to "everyone knowing about it," then there has to be a prior stage. It's a different story if you've got the media in your pocket, of course… but I refuse to believe that swindler's got such substantial political pull.

He's like Oshino, not the type to throw in with any kind of organization.

“If we think of the mass media as a certain kind of authority, then relying on an authority is one way of disseminating a trend… In school terms, that intermediary would be the teachers, or the class president…”

“Totally. If Nadeko wanted to spread some kind of rumor… Considering, what is it, cost performance? Nadeko would probably go through Tsukihi. She’s a big name with all the middle school girls, she’s the boss, so if you spread a rumor to her—that might be even more effective than telling the story to a hundred other people. Assuming Tsukihi actually spreads it around for you—she’s got tight lips.”

“She sure does—she didn’t even crack under torture.”

“T-Torture?”

“Oh nothing,” I waved it off.

Anyway, Tsukihi’s tight-lippedness was well documented—if we’re comparing rumors to viruses, she’s got one hell of an immune system.

Not only did she not fall victim to that swindler, she tried to drive him out—even if a rumor is resistant to countermeasures, you can always cut off the source of infection.

“I guess if you want to popularize something with the general public, you can turn a personality into a billboard…”

“By personality, you mean celebrity, right? Yeah, the forefront of any trend… But does that mean intentionally creating a trend is always gonna involve jumping on some kind of bandwagon?” Sengoku sounded kind of disappointed—she wasn’t displaying it openly, but it definitely seemed like she was losing interest.

Well, it indeed was a terribly boring conclusion, maybe not for a jaded high

schooler like me, but certainly for a naive middle schooler like Sengoku.

“What sells sells because it sells”—that may be the watchword of the business world, but it sure as hell wasn’t interesting.

It isn’t necessarily true that good things become popular.

Bad money drives out good—but if that’s the reality, let’s hear it for the ideal.

“…I don’t think that swindler uses the kind of methods we’re talking about, though. I’m sure he understands them, of course… Still, I can’t imagine him having direct contact with important people. In fact, they must be exactly the ones to whom he contrives for things to be transmitted from ‘a friend of a friend.’”

“…”

“If I were in his position…” Not a hypothetical I wanted to consider, but I’d just have to grin and bear it. “I don’t think I’d want to get anywhere near someone like that. Tsukihi’s name just came up as an example, but in the end he made contact with Karen and avoided Tsukihi completely—”

“Is that…because important people are also dangerous?”

“Uh huh. How can I put this? It feels like a contradiction…but the ideal virus popularizes itself on its own, without any fancy footwork on your part, no need for any advertising or publicity or marketing.”

“Yeah…but isn’t hoping for a virus to popularize itself like standing around waiting for lightning to strike? That’s not artificial, it’s just a natural occurrence… At that point, aren’t you just counting on chance?”

“In which case…”

In which case, maybe that swindler’s methodology was of the “throw some

mud at the wall and see what sticks" variety: simultaneously start circulating a whole bunch of aberration tales, or charms, that you want to popularize, that you want to disseminate—and statistically speaking, one of them will catch on.

Maybe he left it up to chance.

The invisible hand of god…

"But—I wonder if that guy would rely on chance for laying the groundwork, for the preliminary arrangements for a swindle. Well, okay, maybe we should wrap up that part of the discussion for today… Our conclusion for now is: thorough dissemination, and throwing mud at the wall to see what sticks…"

"'Kay."

"Next let's turn to the content of those trends. Leaving aside what someone might want to popularize, what would be easy to popularize?"

Easy to popularize.

Highly contagious—easy to spread.

"When you want to popularize something, whether it's a rumor or a ghost story, or a product, it's important to package it in a form that makes your job easier. With ghost stories, for instance, 'scary' ones spread more readily…right?"

"But they won't catch on if they're 'too scary.' You have to adjust the scariness to the right level, so they're not too intense, and people want to tell them…"

"Hm."

So you needed to draw a line, like the one between horror films and splatter films? They can't be too extreme, or excessive, in other words.

"In every period there are things that come into fashion and things that go out of fashion, and while unexpected things do become popular sometimes, I bet

if you investigated those unpredictable trends, you'd find that they have a surprising amount of overlap."

"Like the three principles of pandemics?"

"This time I think it really is more like the three pillars—with the caveat that there will always be exceptions to the rule…" This was something that Senjogahara, not Hanekawa, had told me. The phrasing was somewhat different, but I relayed the gist of it: "Easy to comprehend, easy to obtain, easy to share—I guess."

"Comprehend, obtain, share?"

"Easy to comprehend, well, I think that one's easy to understand even without an explanation. Something that involves a complicated, confusing procedure won't spread readily. I think we can safely say that approaching something with the idea that 'it's fine if only the people who get it get it' isn't going to make anything go viral—"

Conversely, if you want to popularize something complicated, or a complicated configuration, you have to come up with a way to get that across—to make it clear. Alternately, it becomes essential that people be able to use it as-is, without understanding its underlying complexity.

TVs, cell phones, and computers, for instance—most people use them constantly without ever understanding how they work…

"What about easy to obtain?"

"In a word, I guess that means affordable…though it's not only a question of price. For example, a diamond is a rare gemstone, so regardless of how cheap it becomes, it won't be easy to obtain. And the last one, easy to share, means that it's easy for everyone to enjoy together—however great something is, if anyone

ends up monopolizing it, it won't spread any further. Something that's set up to reward you for sharing your work or your impressions with other people will become a trend much more easily—or be much easier to mold into a trend."

In that regard, the "charms" the swindler spread around were totally on point. I already touched on his *first one's free* M.O., but that must've been why he homed in on "charms" that hinged on human relationships.

Human relationships.

A trend—calculated to debase human relationships.

Another example of bad money driving out good…

"Because a fad means people are getting crazy—even if it's understood as 'staying one step ahead'… Still," I conceded, "if we're bound by these basic principles, we're diverging once again from our original objective of popularizing something in particular."

"I see, something besides the thing you were trying to popularize might take off, but it's just impossible to control which way the wind blows? All you can do is trust in heaven?"

Whichever way the wind blows—is that how it is? asked Sengoku.

"…"

Was that it?

No, I don't buy it.

That swindler, Deishu Kaiki, leaving the swindles by which he makes his living up to divine providence—just didn't jibe with my understanding of how he went about things. No way he was going to clasp the invisible hand of god—or even the hand of the devil.

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

In the end, we never decided what kind of methods that swindler had used to popularize his “charms” within the middle school girl community—and in that sense, our meeting ended fruitlessly. I suppose it was still a little early for Sengoku to take on a subject like the state of trends in modern society.

While we were still chatting, Karen and Tsukihi came home, and the meeting came to a close—then the four of us hung out for the first time in ages. Actually, Karen, who was a year ahead, hadn’t really hung out with Sengoku back in elementary school, so it might have been the first time that particular quartet had been assembled.

Sengoku’s shyness skill was operating at maximum capacity, though it was canceled out by Karen’s amiable-to-a-fault interpersonal skills—but anyway.

It wasn’t until a little later that I found out the truth about that swindler’s methods—specifically, it was the middle of August.

August fourteenth.

And how did it happen? I met with the man himself—met with him the way someone meets with an accident.

Having promised never to return to our town a second time, he’d “returned for his first time.” Gimme a break and fuck off already.

The main topic on that occasion was a couple of his fellow experts—but in the course of the conversation, I asked him about it.

“Hm,” he said. “The ability to know which way the wind is blowing, the

ability to control the wind—nope, that's beyond me. Granted, that might also be a lie."

"…"

Can't trust this guy even an inch.

Maybe it was stupid to even ask, I was thinking, but then he went on. "If you ask me, though, something like the ability to know which way the wind is blowing isn't particularly important. Because the most conducive environment for a pandemic is a state of calm."

"C-Calm?"

"That's the vital thing for causing a pandemic in my opinion, Araragi."

"By 'calm' you mean like—the absence of wind?"

"*While one thing is popular, another thing can't be*—strictly speaking, I suppose you could say that even if something else tried to break through, it wouldn't be able to… So if I wanted to popularize something specific, I'd be sure to choose the right time and place even if I couldn't choose the target."

"…"

"Rumors last for seventy-five days—then for those seventy-five days, you have to give up on creating a trend. Take this town. I wouldn't have been able to do anything over spring break because rumors of a 'vampire' had captured everyone's imagination. No sense in trying to take on an overwhelming number-one smash—and when I say overwhelming, I mean the virus would've overwhelmed any other virus. So once that rumor had run its course—I injected my own into the empty space, the hungry space, it had left behind."

It seemed so obvious once he said it.

In other words, a pandemic will break out where there's a vacuum—or is

more likely to do so, anyway.

“Ghost stories and the word on the street, urban legends—and baseless rumors, they all run rampant when people are emotionally distraught. Which is the same as saying when people have nothing anchoring their lives. A trendless time, in other words—now Araragi. What kind of person do you think a swindler targets, who’s the mark? Think about it.”

“Th-Think about it? That’s not something I want to think about.”

“Humor me.”

“Nothing funny about that question. Anyway…rich people, I guess? Don’t you go after the wealthy?”

“Just what an upstanding person would think. But satisfied people are surprisingly hard to deceive—people who have financial leeway also have emotional leeway. So swindlers target those who’re unsatisfied with their lot, who don’t have that room to breathe.”

“Which is why you set your sights on middle school girls the last time you were here?”

Or.

Going further back—on Senjogahara’s family, while they were agonizing over their daughter’s illness.

“That’s right. A mind filled with anxiety is a mind ripe for deception. Because that person doesn’t have the leeway to worry about whether you’re lying to them or not,” pontificated the swindler, without any hint of remorse. “You were saying that in preparation for my con, I popularized ‘charms’ that would debase human relationships—but in fact it was just the opposite. Their relationships were already debased, so they jumped all over my ‘charms.’”

A state of calm is not necessarily a state of asepsis.

In fact, a virus with the potential to cause an explosive pandemic is always lying dormant just below the surface─said the swindler.

“Are you saying─it was their own fault they got duped?”

“When you put it like that, it makes me not want to put it like that. How about we just blame it on the zeitgeist? If you want to understand the kind of chaotic situation that makes you wonder, ‘Why is this even popular?’ or ‘How did that get so popular?’ it’s really the vacuum that precedes the chaos you should be thinking about.”

“The vacuum─”

“The darkness, you might say. So let me give you a piece of advice: if ‘something inexplicable’ becomes trendy─keep an eye on the zeitgeist. Keep an eye on the very ground beneath your feet. Assume that something is fucked─assume that the situation is critical. Whether it’s a human scheme or a natural occurrence─it’s happening because you live in an age enveloped by darkness.”

“Enveloped by─darkness.”

“The circumstances that make it easy for a fad to break out are pretty much the same as those that make it easy for a riot to break out─when there’s no stable footing, you end up getting swept up by the tide. Ah, but there’s no easier time to be a guy like me,” Kaiki observed, ominously, before continuing, “Now, Araragi. Having taught you such an important trade secret, I must demand an additional fee from you.”

“…”

I’d already paid this guy for information about a certain two-man cell of

experts—but because I'd foolishly asked a question, some kind of option had kicked in.

"I know you've got your emergency fund in the inside pocket of your jacket."

He'd seen right through me.

Hmm.

The wind isn't blowing my way today.

CHAPTER SIX
KOYOMI TREE

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

9

September

There’s no question that the path Karen Araragi treads, the path of karate, is a steep and severe one. But for a slacker like myself, the very idea of having such a clear path laid out before me is enviable. If it were anyone but my little sister, I would be eyeing her jealously; since it’s my little sister, however, I just avert my eyes awkwardly. Nevertheless, I’d be lying if I said I never tried to imagine just what it would feel like, what it would be like, to walk unfalteringly down a ramrod straight one-way street, a highway even, laid out before me with no twists or turns, no need for a map.

To know I was striding down the right road.

Both feet firmly on the ground.

Proceeding step by steady step every day.

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step—and on a journey of a hundred miles, ninety miles is only halfway. In a world where darkness is always one step ahead of you, it’s an untold blessing just to be able to see the path you travel down, even if it’s a path without an end.

Darkness.

The Darkness.

For her there’s no such thing.

I said I’d be jealous if it were anyone but my little sister, but by the same token, if it weren’t my little sister, I might fall in love with that level of humanity—and yet, the kind of life she lives always comes with a disclaimer.

Precisely because her path is so clearly laid out before her—think how

shocking it would be to lose sight of it. I can't help envisioning that horrible eventuality as well.

I've asked her.

If you were in a situation where you had to give up karate, what would you do?

A situation where she had to give it up.

A situation where she had to give up.

Where she had to leave that path—that highway down which she walks.

I really wasn't scheming to upset my sister by bringing up this statistically improbable, exceptional eventuality—I'm not such a mean person. I was only trying to show my concern for her by mulling over my misgivings about a real possibility.

And it is a very real possibility.

When you train morning, noon, and night in a combat sport like karate, there's always the possibility of sustaining a grievous, career-ending injury—or the love of your life might implore you to give up such a dangerous activity. Maybe you end up in a position where you have to focus all your attention on your studies—however clear the road before you, however well-maintained and spectacular, there's always the chance of mechanical trouble.

With the engine, or the electrical system.

There's potential trouble everywhere—however bright the path, however dazzlingly the sun shines down upon it, that doesn't necessarily mean the future is bright.

The Darkness isn't only ahead.

It can also be—inside.

If you stalled out on your path—what would you do?

You find yourself in a pickle sooner or later.

But Karen's unruffled, confident response was simply, "You're wrong, big brother. Because wherever I drop is the finish line. Getting to the point where I can't go any further *is* the goal."

To walk until you drop, without ever stalling out.

In other words, she expressed a fierce determination to forge ahead until she fell.

“This is the tree, big brother,” said Karen─pointing to a tree behind the dojo where she had led me. Hanekawa probably could’ve identified the variety at a single glance, but unfortunately I’m ill-versed in both horticulture and forestry, so “tree” is the best I can do.

Whether “ill-versed” is a generally accepted opposite for the idiomatic term “well-versed” is a whole other question─the only other thing I can say about it is that it was old and almost totally leafless.

“This tree, huh?” was my initial response to Karen’s words─I didn’t know how else to react. “Well─it’s definitely a tree. It’s…slenderer than I expected. From what you told me, I was envisioning something a little sturdier…”

“I didn’t say anything like that.”

“But this is the tree that’s in your way?”

“I didn’t say anything like that either, that’s horrible. It’s all them others who are treating this tree like it’s in the way─I’m its ally.”

“Uh huh…”

All them others struck me as an unexpectedly pungent phrase.

I also found myself wondering if trees really have allies and enemies, but that aside, it seemed clear that Karen, my bigger little sister, had a tremendous amount of empathy for this tree.

Empathy.

My richly sentimental little sisters, in particular this older one, had a tendency to pour their excess emotions into literally anything─so if you didn’t

watch what you said, they could end up casually throwing their support behind anything or anyone.

Which is precisely why, as one wing (?) of the Fire Sisters, this kid reigned over the middle schoolers by popular writ—but one false move and that personality could also prove terribly precarious.

So I never take anything she says at face value. I always have to listen with a cool head—as I pondered this, I reappraised the tree that stood there before me.

"…"

Late September.

I had come along with my little sister Karen Araragi to the town dojo where she trains—a privately owned dojo where they teach karate. A dojo run by a "master" of practical combat karate, where for many years already Karen had been devoting herself to her training.

The melee skills she cultivated there had been demonstrated to her older brother on many occasions, and in that sense I couldn't set foot in that place without a certain bitterness… But under the circumstances, I had no choice.

That is, setting aside my bitterness for a moment, I was definitely interested in darkening the dojo's door at least once—because I had a hankering to meet the person whom Karen, the same Karen who turned up her nose at any kind of etiquette or manners, called "sensei," to find out just what kind of a person this sensei might be.

Half because I wanted to say thanks for taking such good care of Karen, and half because I wanted to complain, *What the hell kind of skills are you teaching my little sister*?

So after an hour and a half, my heart pounding, I reached the dojo that

Karen could dash to in just under an hour. But unfortunately the sensei wasn't in.

"This isn't what I was promised."

"What? I never said aaanything about introducing you to my sensei. Or did I? When? What second of what minute of what hour of what day of what month? How many revolutions of the Earth are we talking about?"

"…"

Shaddup.

If she weren't my little sister, I'd smack her one. No, it's because she was my little sister that I wanted to smack her for being so immature.

"Karen, the only reason I don't smack you right now is that you're stronger than me!"

"How can my own big brother say something so pathetic?"

She looked sad.

I hate that even more than when she looks disgusted.

"Well, I've wanted to introduce the big brother I'm so proud of to my sensei for a long time, too. I thought today would be a perfect opportunity, since there are no classes at the dojo…but nobody's home."

"I mean, it's pretty normal for people to go out on their days off… Wait, did you even make an appointment?"

"Me and my sensei are on the same wavelength, we don't need appointments or Apollos or anything."

"First of all, I don't think too many relationships require spaceships, and second of all, judging from how things have turned out, we very much did need an appointment."

"Gyahahah, that's all over my head."

Despite the fact that I'd taken the time to lay it all out clearly, and in numerical order no less, Karen just laughed it off and lightly vaulted over the gate.

When I say gate, though, I'm not talking about your garden-variety garden gate. The dojo had a gate like the kind in front of a certain kind of house: impressive, or imposing, or really huge, but Karen took off like a ninja and leapt clean over it.

Damn, she doesn't even need CG.

It made me want to market her as the antithesis of today's movie industry—while I was thinking this over, she opened the gate from the inside.

"Okay big brother, c'mon in, this way."

"What are you, a ninja, a phantom thief? You can't just go in there when nobody's home."

I never thought I'd have to explain such a basic concept to a defender of justice like my little sister, but Karen didn't seem phased. In fact she seemed proud. "Don't underestimate the trust between me and my sensei, big brother. I always come and go as I please like this, and it's never been an issue."

"That's unheard of, you're just a disciple…"

That's it.

Next time I'm coming to the dojo with our parents instead. To formally apologize.

"Oh, come on. It's not like I'm going into the house. Just the dojo, and really just the backyard."

"That's all very well, but…"

"Don't be such a stick in the mud. You've got to be more flexible. I can

help you with that, if you want. We can do our daily stretches together from now on."

"If I did the kind of stretches you do, I'd break every bone in my body. It'd be more like splatter than stretch."

"Tra la la."

She practically skipped towards the dojo—I followed after her, thinking how much I envied her seemingly carefree life, and she introduced me to the "tree" in question.

"But even if it's slenderer than I expected, a tree's a tree—it's got such presence," I said.

Looking up again at the problematic tree—though of course Karen said there was no problem at all—I asked, "Are you sure? That up until now—no one noticed this tree was here?"

Allow me to rewind the story a little further.

There I was in my bedroom, studying for exams—it was the end of September, the final stretch, and I must say that my feverish zeal was a fearsome thing indeed.

I was so intensely devoted to the pursuit of knowledge that no one could even get near me, but Karen just waltzed up and plunked her breasts down on top of my head.

“Heyyy, big brotherrr. It’s your beloved boobies, big brotherrr.”

“…”

The big brother comes off looking bad, and the little sister comes off looking stupid.

It wasn’t like this back in April or May.

How did it come to this…when did we start coming off like this? I’d always endeavored to be an exemplary brother to my little sisters.

“What is it. What do you need, Karen?”

“A fine question. But not the pertinent one.”

What an irritating attitude. She’s as flighty as a feather.

“The correct question would be, ‘When should we go?’”

“You make it sound like I’ve agreed to go somewhere with you. To begin with, it’d be so wrong if we could communicate like that, like we were psychics. Now get your enormous boobs off my head and answer my question already. What do you need?”

“Let’s see, what do I need? The truth is, I think you already know what I need, big brother.”

“Okay. Don’t tell me what you need. Just remove your enormous boobs, that’s plenty. The boobs, if you please.”

“Fine. I’ll back off this time.”

She backed off.

Well, I say enormous, but they weren’t Hanekawa-caliber, and if you factored in height relative to size, the comparison wasn’t even worth making.

“Okay. Now that you’ve had your fill of touching your little sister’s boobies, big brother, will you listen to what I have to say? Since I laid my boobies by your ear, won’t you lend it to me in return?”

“I don’t know what Tsukihi’s been telling you, but this time I’m utterly not to blame, okay? You unilaterally laid those balloons on me, okay?”

“Unilaterally? I’m shocked to hear you say that. Just as some people’s hearts accept God’s grace, your head accepted Karen’s boobies.”

“I’ve had enough of your made-up sayings.”

Apparently I was going to have to call a halt to my exam prep—what can you do? I don’t know what she wanted my ear for, but it looked like I had no choice but to lend it.

I mean, since the incident with the swindler back in July, she’d stopped bottling things up (let alone going on the rampage) and learned how to ask her older brother for advice like a proper little sister, that was an improvement, right?

“So. Let’s hear it.”

“You want to hear it? Guess I’ve got no-o-o choice then,” Karen said

smugly.

Not the kind of attitude you'd expect from someone who was asking for advice, but since she could beat me up, I decided to overlook that.

"The fact is, I need your help. Save me, big brother."

Not quite what I was expecting from someone who was acting so big, but she was so physically large that even if she acted small, it wouldn't make much of a difference.

"Save you? Heheh. Would you look at that. Listen, Karen, people can't save other people. People just go and get saved on their own."

"Quit talking that nonsense or I'll pound you."

She brushed me off…

That is, I had a brush with death.

Well, not like it wasn't my own fault for espousing a philosophy that wasn't even mine, but why's my little sister have to crack down on me like that?

"I'm telling you to cut the shit and give me some advice, dumbass. You cruising for a bruising?"

She started cracking the knuckles on both fists.

This was more than a crackdown, she was going to stamp me out.

I was about to be shut up. Permanently.

In a last-ditch effort to demonstrate my dignity as a big brother, I said, "Understood, I'll give it. I'll give it, so hurry up and talk. Chop chop."

"Ehehe, whoopee, score!"

She got all childlike and innocent all of a sudden. It was like riding a rollercoaster.

"Thanks, big brother, that makes me so happy! I'll give you a peek at my

boobies while we talk to say thank you! Peek! Peek!”

“…”

Looks like we’ve got a feral little sister in the house.

With a sister like her, I’ll probably fail my exams no matter how hard I study. They say it’s always those closest to you who trip you up in the end…

“Hey, big brother! You can stroke these legs while you listen! Aren’t they shapely!”

“Sure, if toothpick is a shape. And there will be no stroking. Now if you don’t want to turn me into the silent type, hurry up and tell me what it is you want my advice about.”

“It’s a tree,” she said abruptly.

A total non-sequitur.

That is, she didn’t telegraph the topic at all—which I’m sure is a fearsome skill to wield in combat, but in conversation it just makes you a bad conversationalist.

It made me keenly aware of the difference between the art of war and the art of conversation.

But if I didn’t get the conversation back on track, I could end up with a different kind of keen sensation, so I nodded soberly. “Ah, a tree, you say? I see, I see.”

I was appeasing my little sister.

I’m the kind of guy who can make the tough decisions…like not hesitating to be obsequious towards my little sister in the service of my goal—however I dress it up, though, in this case my goal was *I don’t want my little sister to hit me.*

The A of Araragi also stands for Appease!

“But of course, makes perfect sense. Who else would you talk to about a tree but me.”

“Thunderbolt Punch!”

I got hit anyway.

She may be an idiot, but I guess she still picked up on the fact that I was making an idiot out of her.

“The Thunderbolt Punch, a strike employing the power of static electricity!”

“That clearly employed the power of your muscles!”

“A tree was discovered at the dojo, and everyone’s treating it like it’s in the way. So I want to save it. But I don’t have the power to, so please big brother, do something. I know you’ll be able to do something. I believe in you. Now show me that you can live up to my expectations. Show me.”

“…?”

As I recall, “speak like water running down a board” was an idiom originally used for describing the fluid speech of silent film narrators, but the way Karen embodied it felt more like a cold shower.

Transmit failure, I’m not getting any of this…

“Come on. Don’t you get it? Man, you’re slow on the uptake, big brother. If you can’t get motivated without seeing some titties, just say so already.”

“What do you take your own brother for, the Turtle Hermit?”

“Ahaha. If only my big brother was Master Roshi, that would be amazing. Though I guess Master Roshi minus his strength would be kind of like you.”

“If you took away the Turtle Hermit’s strength, what would that leave?”

“A turtle?”

“I’ll take the hermit!”

Still, a big brother who can’t understand what his little sister’s talking about would be pitiful, so I decided to make an effort to make sense of her story.

“A tree was discovered at the dojo… You mean like some timber, to use for breaking?”

“No. What a horrible thing to say. Want me to rearrange your face for you?”

“Who’s being horrible here? As if I’d let you rearrange it.”

“Let’s see, so there’s the dojo, right? Like so.”

Karen started explaining with motions and gesticulations. But it’s hard to imagine how gesticulations could help in explaining the existence of a dojo, and indeed, I didn’t understand her explanation at all.

Fine.

Forget the details, for now let’s focus on the big picture.

I don’t know about the “like so” part, but basically there’s a dojo? And that dojo is the practical combat dojo you attend?

With you so far.

“The dojo’s been around for fifty years. It’s a big, beautiful /an-tee-duh-loo-vee-un/ dojo.”

“Seemed like ‘antediluvian’ wasn’t spelled out just now. You don’t know how, do you? Well, whatever. So, what’s wrong with the dojo?”

“Nothing’s wrong with the dojo.”

“I’m sorry?”

What the heck? I was quickly starting to suspect that asking my advice was merely a pretext for disrupting my exam prep…

“It’s ’round back of the dojo.”

“’Round back?”

“’Round back, not a roundhouse.”

“I wasn’t confused. I don’t exactly have roundhouses on my mind all the time.”

“Back in the day I used to think the Round House must be an awesome school of martial arts or something. A warrior clan like the Tairas or Minamotos. I was so disappointed to find out it was just a single move…but watch out, big brother, watch out, don’t derail the conversation. We’re talking ’round back here, not a roundhouse.”

“You’re the only one who’s mixed up.”

She’s the worst explainer.

I started to wish she would draw me a picture instead.

“By back I mean backyard. There’s a courtyard behind the dojo. And that’s where the tree was discovered.”

“Yeah, but this ‘discovered’ part is the part I really don’t get… Are you basically saying some lumber was lying on the ground in the courtyard behind the dojo?”

“You don’t understand a thing, do you, big brother? That’s not what I’m saying at all. All you ever think about is boobies, so that’s how you start to see the world. That’s how you see your own little sister.”

“No, I don’t, and never mind what goes on in there the rest of the time, right now I’m just worried about you.”

“Yeah? Thanks for worrying about me, big brother!”

She turned cute all of a sudden.

She only hears the good parts.

“It’s not lumber. It’s not for breaking. It’s a living tree. Roots in the ground and everything.”

“Hunh?”

“No good? You still don’t get it?”

“No. I think I get it, but…”

By getting it, I no longer got it.

Or it got harder to get.

I’d gotten the vague impression she was telling me that one day some mysterious lumber had been on the ground in the backyard of the dojo—had been put there, or brought there—but a living tree? With roots in the ground?

“Let me get this straight, Karen.”

“Ha, no need.”

“Indulge me. So you’re saying that there’s a tree growing in the backyard of the dojo you go to…but you never noticed it before now?”

“It wasn’t just me. It’s not like someone else would ever notice something I didn’t, right?”

“Wrong, but that’s some serious self-confidence you’ve got there.”

“It was everyone. Including my sensei, who owns the place. We only just now noticed that there’s a tree there—and we don’t only practice inside the dojo, you know, we train outside too.”

“Uh huh… Sure, outdoor karate practice seems reasonable.”

But if they were training out in the courtyard—the story was getting stranger and stranger.

This courtyard had been getting plenty of use all along—and yet no one had

ever noticed this tree growing there?

“And then recently, I found it. ‘What’s this? Have you always been here, o honored tree?’ I said.”

“Huh? You can talk formally?”

“Don’t act so surprised, of course I can. With those who deserve it. Seems pretty basic.”

“But you’ve never once with me.”

“Didn’t I just say, who deserve it?”

She doesn’t beat around the bush, my little sister.

Does she think her big brother’s feelings can’t get hurt?

“Karen, you don’t have to be formal with me, but try talking that way to your big brother to see how it feels.”

“Even though I won’t mean it? Um, ‘O honored brother, would you care to look upon my humble boobies?’”

“I would not. Fine. Continue the story.”

“‘What’s this? Have you always been here, o honored boobies?’ I said.”

“You’re getting mixed up again. If there were heretofore unnoticed boobies in the courtyard, that would be a big deal.”

“A tree was a big deal too. I mean, no one’d ever noticed. It was higgledy-piggledy, everyone was like, *Huh? What’s this doing here? Did someone plant this here in the middle of the night?*”

“…”

“‘Higgledy-piggledy’ sounds like the name of a sausage-maker, doesn’t it? Hilda the Pig Lady.”

“Just because I’m not talking doesn’t mean I’m bored, no need to force

yourself to say something funny."

"Seems like their sausages would be the best. Or not the wurst, anyway."

"Maybe it's your turn to try not talking! Um, so, what was it actually like? Was there anything left?"

"Huh? Oh, no, big brother, I haven't actually eaten there. No leftovers, sorry."

"I'm not asking about the sausages. I'm asking if there was any trace left of someone coming into the courtyard in the middle of the night and planting that tree. That's a big operation, examining the dirt around it ought to tell you something."

"Yup. I'm sure it would even tell you something, big brother."

"Are you asking me for help, or mocking me? Which is it?"

"I'm mocking you while asking you for help."

"Don't try to be clever."

"There was no trace of anything like that. It was firmly rooted. No evidence of any digging or planting. Of course neither the sensei nor any of the pupils are experts on soil or trees, so I can't be perfectly, a hundred-percent certain, but as far as anyone can tell, the tree seems to have been there for ages. It's an /an-tee-duh-loo-vee-un/ tree, seems like it's been growing there for decades and decades."

"Hmmm…"

Not only does she not know how to spell "antediluvian," she seems to think it's just a synonym for "old."

How can she possibly get such good grades?

She must've figured out how to game the system.

“But that’s…kind of scary. A tree no one ever noticed, growing in a courtyard that everyone uses all the time for training and whatever else─”

“That’s the thing, big brother!”

Karen slapped the floor.

With a smack.

What’s she trying to do to my floorboards?

“That’s what everybody says! What, are you on their side too, big brother?!”

“No, no, I’m on your side, of course?” I instantly tried to appease my little sister. I seemed to be making a habit of it; this big brother really doesn’t have any dignity, does he… “And? What exactly are they saying, Karen?”

“Everybody, they keep saying that the tree is scary. Scary, or freaky. Of course our sensei isn’t saying anything like that, but all my insufficiently disciplined senpai and kohai are, they’re spooked.”

“…”

Lumping her senpai in with her kohai. Even supposing she spoke formally towards anyone besides her sensei, it’s gotta be a pretty exclusive group…

“Freaky, huh? Even if that’s going too far, it’s not like I can’t understand where they’re coming from.”

I’m not sure this is a fitting analogy, but wouldn’t it be like cleaning your room and finding a book on your bookshelf that you didn’t remember ever seeing before?

A book you didn’t remember buying, didn’t remember reading.

Sitting on the shelf as if it had been there all along─even if it wasn’t freaky, it’d be a little unsettling.

“I see. So you’re on their side, after all. You’re one of them.”

“One of them? You keep talking about *them*, but I’ve never even met a single one of these people…”

“How can you side with people you’ve never even met! I’m the one you should believe! Are you really going to listen to a perfect stranger over me?”

She was getting really worked up.

A scary little sister. And even stupider than she is scary.

What could be worse than a scary, stupid little sister?

Maybe this is asking too much, but how about you try being just a tiny bit moé.

“At least hear me out! Can’t you treat us evenly, even?”

“Okay, okay. I’ll even be even. So, you’re saying you don’t feel that way?”

“Huh? About what?” Karen looked blank. “Um, what were we talking about again?”

“Don’t get sidetracked. You’re losing the thread of your own story. You didn’t feel like it was freaky that there was a tree you’d never noticed before growing in the courtyard?”

“Nope. Sure, I was shocked, but I wasn’t spooked. I always order gizzard when I have yakitori, so I have a lot of grit.”

“That’s not how it works, and I think courage is associated with the heart.”

“That’s fine. I usually order that too.”

Now that you mention it, the girl does go for the innards.

“In fact, when I first noticed it I felt ashamed to call myself a martial artist. So ashamed I considered suicide.”

“Sounds like you don’t have the mental fortitude to be a martial artist…”

“I hoped everyone else would feel the same about it, but apparently they didn’t.”

Completely ignoring my dig, Karen continued with an uncharacteristically forlorn look in her eye. No, not just uncharacteristic. She’s not the kind of person who ever has that look in her eye. Which meant—this must’ve been a greater shock to her than I’d thought.

“And because they’re scared—they’re talking about cutting it down.”

And that’s how I ended up ’round back of the dojo.

Led there by the arm.

I don’t mean that metaphorically, we really did go the whole way arm in arm.

I’d be delighted to seem like a guy out for a companionable jaunt with his little sister, but the reality is that people probably thought I was the younger sibling. Karen’s so much taller than me.

And while we’re at it, the arm in arm part was “to keep me from running away before we got there,” so the truth is that it wasn’t particularly “companionable” either.

Well.

There is precedent for me breaking my promise to Karen and running off, so I can understand why she felt that way, but for once I had no thought of running away.

Given how emotional and quick to judge she is, I took her story with a grain of salt—but to be honest, this story of a “tree that existed without anyone noticing it” piqued my interest.

…It had nothing to do with avoiding my exam prep, of course.

“Hmm…”

As I’d told Karen, the tree was a lot smaller than I’d imagined—even so, and even though it was an aged tree, it seemed highly unlikely that it could’ve been there without anyone noticing.

It seemed unlikely—but apparently that's what happened, so what can I say? If Karen had been the only one claiming this, I would've said my little sister was oblivious and that'd be the end of it (okay, maybe not?), but with the other pupils and even the master of the dojo all corroborating her story…

"So you were the first one to notice it? This tree?"

"I sure was. Praise me, praaaise me. Pat my head, paaat it."

"I'm sorry to say you're too tall, I can't reach."

"I'm not that huge…"

"So when everyone is training in the courtyard, you stand closest to this tree, right? Don't you think it was just that no one could see the tree because you were in the way?"

"I'm telling you, I'm not that huge."

Karen went and actually stood in front of the tree.

Some portion of the trunk was hidden, of course, but it's not like I couldn't see the tree—obviously, since it was at least ten feet tall.

There wasn't a single leaf or fruit or anything—whether it was just that the season had passed, or whether the tree had run out of the requisite life force to produce such things, I couldn't say… But judging from its height, I would've expected it to be visible even from outside the walls.

I asked Karen about this.

Shaking her head, she replied, "Dunno. I take a different route. Maybe I saw it…but I was never aware of it."

"There you go… I mean, most people don't go around peering at the trees in other people's yards, right?"

"Yeah. And I think the same is basically true even when you're inside the

yard itself, or in the middle of training. So maybe we just never noticed it. But doesn't that mean it was just our own negligence?" As she said this, Karen turned around and touched the tree. "We never noticed this tree thanks to our own negligence—we weren't kind enough to notice it, and now that we've noticed it we say that *it's* freaky and ought to be cut down? Isn't that fucked up?"

"Well…"

To be perfectly honest, I could see where the people who said it "ought to be cut down" were coming from. But at the same time, it was only natural for Karen to think the whole thing was "fucked up"—whether or not it actually was "fucked up" is another question, all I'm saying is it was only natural for Karen to think so.

Both sides' opinions were valid.

As a disinterested third party, I could only say that I understood where everyone was coming from—but the important thing here was that I wasn't a disinterested third party.

There's a time and a place, of course.

But at that time, and in that place, all I could be was Karen's big brother—that's all I wanted to be.

"Okay then. It seems like you were telling the truth this time, so I'll help you."

"What the hell, big brother, are you saying you didn't believe me? How rude, when have I ever lied to you?"

"Including only the clearly verifiable instances, you've lied to me on 293 occasions. The first time was when you were two years old and had broken one of my toys."

“I don’t know whether to say you’ve got an amazing memory, a small mind, or a short stature…”

“Leave my stature out of it.”

Anyway, let’s get down to business.

Needless to say, we were currently trespassing on someone else’s property—for Karen this was evidently a *mi casa es su casa* situation, but this was my first visit to the home of someone who I didn’t know from a hole in the ground.

I could not have been more antsy.

“In other words—you want to figure out some way to keep the tree from being cut down, right?”

“Yeah. With your political pull, big brother, I know you’ll manage something.”

“I wouldn’t count on my political pull.”

“I have an even more shameless request… ‘Keeping the tree from being cut down’ makes it sound like it’d be okay if we found some way of moving it somewhere else. But that’s off the table.”

“Off the table…”

Dial back the language when you’re asking for help, okay?

Why the hell are you saying that to me like it’s some kind of rule, or a condition of my contract?

“It’d feel like we were driving this tree out of its home, and I couldn’t stand that. Which is why I ask that you find a way for it to stay here like this forever.”

“Forever, huh…”

The tree seemed like it was going to die of its own accord in the not too

distant future, so the “forever” part honestly seemed a bit difficult…though likewise, moving a tree that old somewhere else was probably worse than difficult.

If we were to preserve the tree, it seemed like it was going to have to be done there—whether or not I had the political pull.

“From what you said, your sensei doesn’t think this tree is freaky.”

“Are you kidding my? It’s me sensei we’re talking about.”

“That didn’t come out right, did it?”

“Are you kidding me? It’s my sensei we’re talking about.”

“Geez, saying it with the same gusto like you never messed up. In that case, though…can’t you just ask your sensei to talk to the students who’re so freaked out about it?”

“It’s not that easy! Sensei certainly isn’t freaked out by the tree, but that’s only because to a martial artist, trees are just something to be kicked over.”

“…”

That’s nuts.

Kicking over trees instead of cutting them down?

Faced with someone like that, I guess Karen couldn’t simply come out and say she felt sorry for the tree—

“If this tree were gone, there’d be more room for training. So freaky or not, I think sensei would secretly be glad to see it go. But it’s not like I haven’t already pled my case. I managed to get the tree a temporary reprieve.”

“Is that so?”

“Just because I came to you, big brother, doesn’t mean I didn’t go to my sensei first.”

“Is that so…”

“But it’s impossible to stop all the other disciples. They’re all pretty cocky and won’t just quietly follow sensei’s orders.”

“Hmmm… In that case, what if you tried to convince them as their fellow karate student instead of your sensei handing down an order?”

“No good. Otherwise I would’ve done it already and not have bowed my head to you, big brother, I seriously hated having to.”

“Seriously hated, huh…”

The hurts just keep on coming from this little sister of mine.

Like she’s trying to gradually wear down my health bar.

“At the same time, if I can convince the others, I bet I can convince my sensei—that is, sensei said as much.”

“A-ha…”

“To be exact, what sensei said was, ‘If you can beat the shit out of all the other disciples and change their minds, I don’t mind leaving the tree alone. For your sake, I’ll suppress my desire to kick it over.’ But I really don’t want to beat the shit out of all the other disciples.”

“…”

Seemed like her sensei erred a little too far on the side of practical combat.

And the fact that Karen said she didn’t “want to” rather than “couldn’t” was terrifying… Though if they went by majority rule, she would get pwned, so maybe her sensei was considering her feelings in a way.

The courtyard belonged to the dojo, so it was up to the sensei what happened to the tree—yup, Karen was a cherished disciple.

“And my cherished little sister… If that’s how it is, the obvious course of

action would be to try and convince each of the other pupils one by one…”

Cocky.

I’m not sure exactly what Karen meant by that, but if every one of them was a seasoned combatant, convincing them one by one didn’t seem like it’d be an easy task.

Instead of dealing with them one at a time—the best solution would be to come up with a “principle” that could convince all of them at once.

I touched the aged tree as Karen was doing—and it felt real, in a way that didn’t come across when you were simply looking at it.

It made me think, *This is a living thing.*

It wasn’t just Karen, anyone might’ve been opposed to “killing” it simply because it’d started to wither…or simply because no one had been aware of it before.

Putting aside whether or not I agreed.

“If nothing else, we’ve got to get rid of this preconception that the tree is freaky. In other words—if we can prove that it’s not an aberration, or an apparition, or some kind of evil spirit, but just a regular old plant…”

“Right. If only we can set those scaredy-cats’ minds at ease.”

“…”

It might not be so easy to convince those “scaredy-cats” with such a hostile attitude…

“Yeah? Fine, let me rephrase that. Chickens, not scaredy-cats.”

“Still only sensing hostility. You’ve got to be buddy-buddy with them.”

“It’s not like we’re not buddies. I usually have the utmost respect for my fellow fighters. But in this case they’re chicken. A bunch of Chicken Littles,

running around like chickens with their heads cut off. But mark my words, their actions will come home to roost."

"Uh huh… Anyway."

Naturally, it wouldn't be too hard to prove that the tree was just a plain old tree—we could verify it by taking a cell sample. No exaggeration, we could end the whole business with a little trip to the school science lab.

But I didn't think that was what Karen was after—and I didn't think it'd make the "chickens" back down.

Scientific inquiry doesn't necessarily do anything to dispel a visceral doubt—saying the tree had been falsely accused might be putting it a little forcefully, but establishing its innocence was a bit of a Devil's Proof…

I knew.

I knew that this was just a plain old tree and not an aberration—but there was absolutely no way for me to get that across to someone else…

And when you get right down to it, even my sense of things isn't always correct. It'd be the Vampire's Proof, not the Devil's Proof—still, if push came to shove, I could get Shinobu to confirm it.

"Karen. Can you think of a reason why no one noticed this tree all those years? Doesn't it seem a little much to ascribe it entirely to the greenness of some karate students?"

"Not at all."

"I see…"

If that was how she felt then so be it, but if we could only "cook up" some kind of reason, something that made sense, it seemed like we might be able to convince the other students.

I say “cook up” like I’m some sort of swindler because when you really think about it, we could probably chalk up the fact that no one ever spotted this tree to simple negligence—if not greenness.

No, maybe negligence was overstating the case, too.

But it’s only natural for there to be trees in a certain type of courtyard—Kanbaru’s house has them, for instance, and since it’s a pretty standard scenic option for a house with this kind of vibe, you don’t end up really paying it any mind.

It was neither negligence nor greenness.

It’s just that nobody paid any attention to the presence of the tree—until Karen “pointed it out,” and then it was suddenly thrust into the forefront of everyone’s mind.

Which is probably…precisely why Karen felt responsible for an old tree growing in somebody else’s courtyard, even if that person is her sensei.

“So, what did Tsukihi say about it?”

“Hm?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. There’s no way you consulted me without consulting Tsukihi first—what did the Fire Sisters’ strategist have to say?”

“Oh. She told me about Washington.”

“…The city?”

“The president.”

“…”

I assumed she meant the story about how George Washington, first president of the United States of America, cut down a cherry tree…

“D-Dare I ask why she brought up that story?”

“She said, *Can’t you just break it and apologize?*”

“…”

Sounds like Tsukihi when she has no interest in what you’re saying…

My littler little sister Tsukihi loves to stick her nose into other people’s troubles, but is the flipside of that her utter lack of interest in her own family’s troubles?

“I’m afraid she wasn’t actually listening to anything you had to say. What would you be apologizing for? What misdeed?”

“She was saying that regardless of what you have or haven’t done, whether you’re in the wrong or not, if something happens, just apologize.”

“Tsukihi’s entire life philosophy laid bare…”

Though in this case, Karen would probably be a hero if she broke it—seeing as that’s what everyone including her sensei was hoping for.

I was reminded afresh of Karen’s inner strength—sticking to her own opinion even when everyone around her, her erstwhile comrades no less, all saw it differently.

I, at least, wasn’t possessed of the mental fortitude to brave friction and conflict when victory promised no concrete advantage or benefit.

That alone.

That alone was enough to make me want to help her out, just this once—oops, that makes it sound like I care about my little sister.

Let’s call it an opportunity for me to put Karen in my debt.

“Heheheh.”

“What’s with the evil look?”

“Karen. How much time have we got to play with?”

“Almost none. Even tomorrow might be too late. We’re up against the possibility that someone’ll try and knock it over sometime today.”

“Gosh, at least use a saw.”

Anyway, not much time.

Almost none, or none.

Even if we did have some time, it would be of the essence—I had to assume that all the other disciples came and went as freely as Karen, so it was entirely possible one of them might go rogue. And seemingly every last one of them could topple the tree without using any tools—

“Then I know what to do. Karen, you can rely on your reliable brother.”

“Really? Then as thanks I’ll let you do whatever you please with my boobies.”

“I don’t want you to think that I was motivated by that reward, so I will not do whatever I please.”

“Playing hard to get, huh. Why, you…”

“How about I do whatever I displease.”

“Whatever you displease?! What are you planning to do to my boobies?! Anyway, big brother, what are you going to do?”

“Heh. Trust me.”

“Please, Hanekawa!”

“You’re just unloading it on me?”

That night, I called Hanekawa. I’d decided to give her a full rundown on the old tree and Karen’s dojo, and to ask for the benefit of her wisdom.

“I did everything I could, but I hit a wall. Please, do something for Karen. Help me, Hanekawa, you’re my only hope.”

“Aren’t you giving up a little too easily?”

I heard her sigh.

Lately Hanekawa had stopped even trying to hide her disappointment in me.

“Please. I’ll do whatever I please with your boobies if you do.”

“My boobies are my own, thank you very much…but fine. For Karen’s sake, not yours, Araragi. If I think of it that way, I can find the motivation.”

“So, what do you think?”

“Hm? Hmm? About what?”

“I mean, first off I’d like to hear your thoughts on the matter—who are you with, Karen or everybody else?”

“Karen, of course. You can’t just dispose of a living tree for no good reason. You don’t agree, Araragi?”

“Let’s see…that’s my gut feeling, but if I were actually involved, who knows—I probably would’ve gone along with everyone else’s opinion, whatever my own feeling might’ve been.”

“And there you go.”

“Hnh?”

“That’s how everyone besides Karen must have felt—what I mean is, I don’t think the majority of them actually want to dispose of the tree like you and your sister think they do. If you can just get the opinion leaders to change their minds, everything’ll be taken care of.”

“Hmm…”

Hanekawa’s done it again.

My faith in her is not misplaced.

“And I think you were exactly right about the reason no one noticed that tree up until now, Araragi—it wasn’t a question of noticing or not noticing, it was just that nobody was really aware of it. But once it’s on your mind, it’s really on your mind—it ends up catching your eye more than it would otherwise. Like your bed head, Araragi.”

“Like my bed head, huh…”

If it’s catching your eye, say something.

At the time, I mean.

“When you learn a new word, it starts cropping up everywhere—that sort of thing?”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” Hanekawa said. “Or like how nobody remembers every single shop on a street even if it’s one they walk down all the time.”

“Except for you.”

“Ahaha, as if,” Hanekawa laughed.

To cover up the truth, probably.

“This goes back to what we were talking about earlier, but I wonder if some

of the disciples at the dojo actually *had* noticed the tree before. But once everyone started talking about the ‘tree no one had noticed,’ they felt like they couldn’t speak up. Doesn’t that seem possible?”

“Like they didn’t want to spoil the mood? Definitely seems possible.”

“But even if that explains the phenomenon itself, we still need to figure out how to spin it. It’s only natural for people to see it as a mysterious phenomenon, as a mysterious tree.”

“I mean, this confluence of coincidences might get passed down to future generations as the tale of an aberration. Who knows what kinds of stories get popular, or how…”

We can theorize about it.

But a theory is just that.

It can never be anything more.

“Just to be clear, Araragi, there’s a pandemic of panic sweeping the dojo now, right?”

“Panic is kind of an exaggeration…but yeah, there’s something of an outbreak.”

“So we just need to bring that to an end.”

“Hm? Well, sure. But countermeasures are ineffective against pandemics, aren’t they? That’s the whole problem.”

“No, that’s not necessarily true. There is a way to stop a pandemic.”

“Huh?”

“A way to stop one, or a way for one to stop—”

I guess this time there’s nothing for it.

Hanekawa made it sound like she’d prefer it to be otherwise—and once I’d

heard the “wisdom” she was about to share, I understood why.

This time, even I couldn’t bring myself to say—*you know everything, don’t you*.

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

Well, the fact that I didn't set Hanekawa up for her usual catchphrase is already a hell of a twist ending, but anyway, here's what happened. Cutting straight to the conclusion, the old tree Karen wanted to protect didn't get chopped down.

And naturally I don't mean that it got punched or kicked over, either—it's alive and well even as we speak. I can't guarantee it'll be there forever—but for now, it does seem to have weathered the storm.

As for what we did:

"A pandemic or a panic will come to an end—when it gets to where it's going."

It'll stop when it reaches its goal.

Basically, when any kind of virus has spread so widely that it can't spread any further, there's nothing else for it to infect, so the outbreak ends of its own accord.

That's how the food chain remains stable—though in this case, of course, we couldn't actually let it get to where it was going since "the end of the line" for this particular pandemic was the old tree's disposal.

"So what we have to do is *move* the goal posts—at this stage, everyone thinks the tree is 'freaky,' right? Or one step up, 'scary'—that's where the general awareness level is at, right? 'Freaked out,' 'terrified'—we just have to move them one stage further up the ladder. That's where we need to put the goal."

“One stage further…”

“Which would be awe, I guess?”

Awe. Not just fear.

Fearful─reverence.

The next day, this is what Karen told her fellow disciples.

That aged tree was like the ones used in the construction of our sacred dojo─and apparently it was planted in the rear courtyard as the dojo’s guardian deity.

Which explains─the mysterious phenomenon we all experienced.

That was how she explained it to them.

That was how she spun it to them.

“Having watched unseen over the disciples of this dojo for many decades, a god of the martial arts finally revealed itself, its energy expended. To cut it down would be unthinkable─”

She adopted Hanekawa’s fairy tale pretty much as-is─Karen, of course, isn’t the kind of person who’d lie to anyone except her big brother, so first I had to dupe her.

She also isn’t the type to believe in aberrations, but a few months previously she’d experienced some weird shit, and apparently the spiritual frame story of an “invisible martial arts guardian deity” was relatively easy for her, as a martial artist, to accept.

As for the other students of the dojo, including the ones who’d only been swept along─“the truth of the matter” had been brought to light without negating their opinions and feelings, it even extrapolated from them, so that was the end of the line for the panic, or to put it another way, nothing more happened.

And─

If that was the truth, they'd never dream of harming the tree.

This fiction was not going to fool Karen's sensei, the master of the dojo, of course. It stands to reason, though there's no way of knowing for sure, that the lumber used to build the dojo didn't come from the same kind of tree as our aged friend.

"But I somehow doubt that'll come up─their sensei won't want to spoil the mood. After all, Karen will have convinced everyone like she promised."

Apparently, that was indeed how it went.

I guess Hanekawa's view that the sensei, who had a dojo to run, wasn't foolish enough to rekindle a panic that had finally abated, was on point─and so.

For the moment, the tree's life has been prolonged─Karen, taking responsibility, protected this tree she had "found."

"I do feel bad about lying, though…"

Having leaned on Hanekawa's wisdom, I was in no position to bolster her spirits when she said this, but I couldn't help trying to console her.

"It wasn't necessarily a lie."

"Hunh?"

"For all we know, that tree might be an aberration. I don't know if it's a guardian deity, but…maybe it was an aberration that no one was aware of because it was hiding its presence all along. And the dojo being built from the same kind of wood isn't out of the question. It's statistically possible."

"Haha. Sure, a statistically negligible possibility."

"Statistically negligible possibilities are still possible. And…"

Well.

Even if I meant it by way of consolation, the next thing I said might've gone too far.

"Thanks to the way we spun it, that tree might actually have become an aberration. One to watch over the disciples as they train."

KOYOMIMONOGATARI Part 1

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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